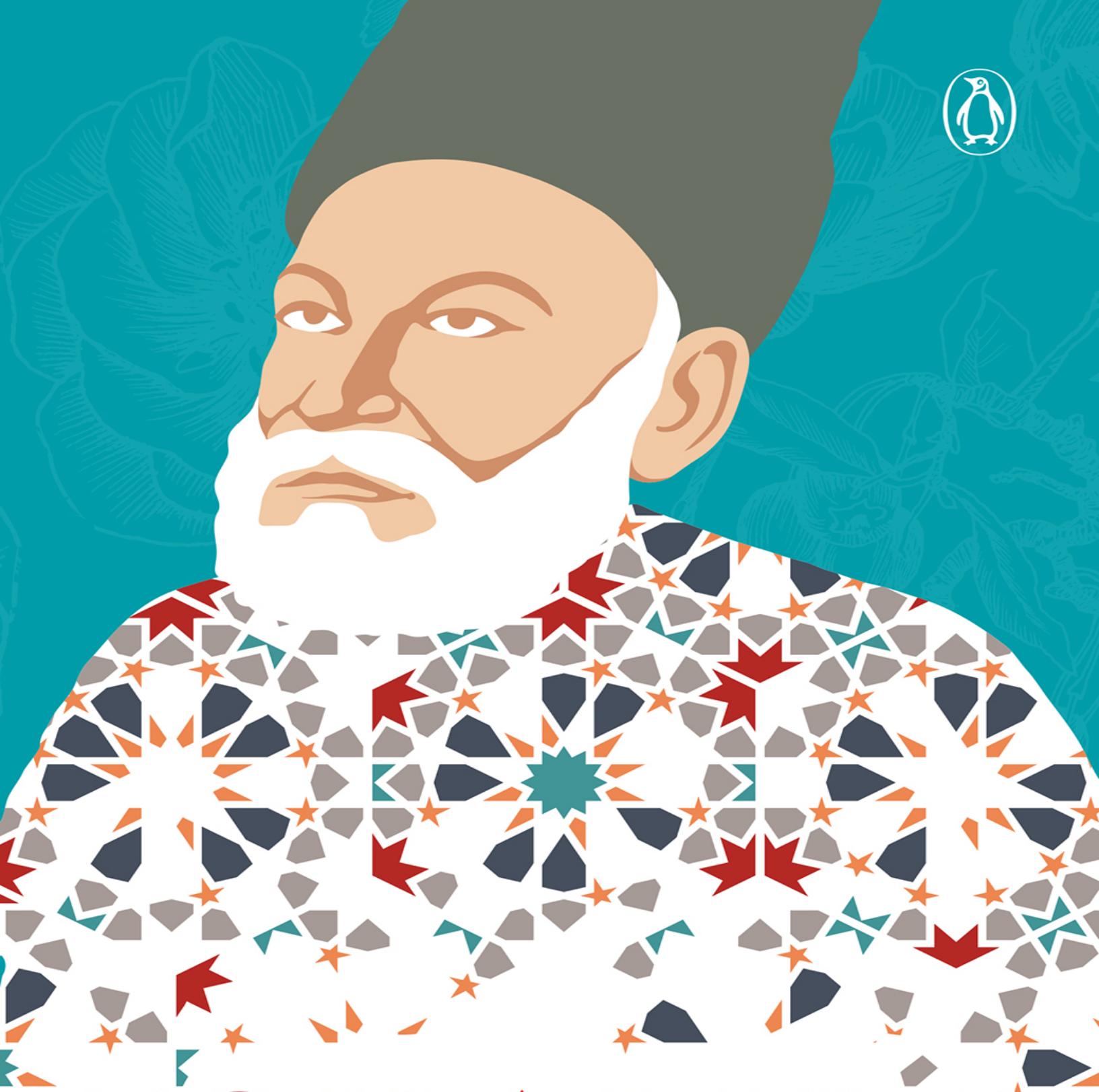

GHALIB

~ a thousand desires ~

RAZA MIR

RAZA MIR

GHALIB

a thousand desires

PENGUIN BOOKS

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GHALIB

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Preface

Mirza Ghalib is perhaps the most widely chronicled Urdu poet in English. The current bookscape shows several volumes on him, a veritable plethora. There are Internet sites devoted to him, and Ghalib's couplets circulate relentlessly across social media. The terrain of Ghalib scholarship, it would appear, is well-mapped.

So where does my modest contribution fit in?

This book is designed to introduce Ghalib to a newer readership. I have attempted to write it in relatively contemporary language to target a new generation. There are several young people whose interest in Ghalib is immense thanks to his ubiquity in popular culture, but whose ability to engage seriously with him is hampered. This may be because of their unfamiliarity with Urdu and its outsider-unfriendly metaphorical conventions. But we also lack engaging material that melds together history and anecdote, poetry and meaning, the serenely effulgent world of the mushaira and the brutal historico-political conflagrations of Ghalib's time. My relatively short book has ambitions to bridge that chasm. It has not been written for the Ghalib expert or the Urdu expert, but for a relative newcomer. Hopefully, it has not sacrificed depth in the pursuit of simplicity.

A quick roadmap for what is to follow. I begin the book with a description of four imagined vignettes from Ghalib's life, a prologue of sorts that fleshes out Ghalib's personality in a quasi-fictional manner. The rest of the book is divided into two parts. I begin the first part with a biography of Ghalib, interspersed with a historical understanding of his milieu (Chapter 1). My aim here is not just to tell his story but also to evoke the conflict-ridden yet wondrous world that he inhabited. I then

attempt to explore a few dimensions of Ghalib's persona as a poet, and situate him in his time. I look at Ghalib's attitudes to religion and religiosity, which are complex, but integral to his personality, and embody the spiritual temper of his time (Chapter 2). Following from that, I discuss a few paradoxical elements of Ghalib's personality, which don't neatly add up, but give us a sense of how he survived through his wits in an atmosphere where he often found himself at the wrong end of the power divide (Chapter 3). I also offer some space to Ghalib's critics, both his peers and those who came after him, to see how they received him (Chapter 4).

The unique age Ghalib lived in deserves some detailed contextual analysis. I describe the manner in which Urdu emerged in the century between 1750 and 1850 as a sophisticated language with its own literary and poetic traditions (Chapter 5). I conclude the first part with a commentary on how Ghalib remains relevant in the literary landscape of the twenty-first century across the Indian subcontinent and the globe (Chapter 6).

I begin the second part of the book with a description of the ghazal, a dominant poetic form in which Ghalib wrote. I follow it up with a detailed analysis of a famous ghazal by Ghalib to uncover the richness of metaphors that abound in his work. I then offer a variety of translations of his work, some stand-alone couplets (*ash'aar*), some couplets bearing his poetic signature (*maqtey*), some rhyming couplets that start off his poems (*matley*) and a few poems translated complete (*ghazaliyaat*).

In the appendices to the book, I first introduce a few of Ghalib's contemporaries in the world of Urdu poetry to show how, despite his obvious talents, Ghalib was hardly an outlier and had occasion to match wits against the best. I also provide a selective and annotated bibliography for those seeking to learn more about Ghalib. In keeping with the profile of my anticipated readership, I lean more heavily towards those works that appear in English, and especially those that are available in the digital and Internet realms. I end the book by providing a brief timeline of events relevant to Ghalib's life.

Ghalib died in 1869, 150 years before this book was published. But I am sure my readers will agree that in a manner of speaking, he lives with us, transcending space and time, cementing his status as the greatest Urdu poet ever. To quote the final verse of his *divaan*:

> *Ada-e khaas se Ghalib hua hai nukta-sara*
> *Sala-e aam hai yaaraan-e nuktadaaN ke liye*
>
> Ghalib sings his special verses armed with verve aplenty
> This is an open invitation for the cognoscenti

~

I have several debts to acknowledge as I look back on the long process that constitutes the evolution of this book. My parents Taqi and Zakia recited poetry to their children. The atmosphere in our house was one where attachment to poetry became interactive. My first acknowledgment is thus to my parents. Now that I have my own home, I recite poetry incessantly to my older son, Safdar, though his poetic preferences run more towards Kendrick Lamar. My wife, Farah, has become my most thorough editor, and I have her to thank for many a tweak in the translations as well as the body of the text. Her frank feedback improves my work immeasurably. My brother, Husain, provided the book with the most detailed copy edit imaginable, to go with substantive observations on structure and thematics. My sister, Syeda, is very enthusiastic in her feedback and encouragement and read an early draft of this book as well. For direct help with this manuscript, I thank Farah, Husain and Syeda, and my uncle S.M. Shahed. Those four have been my primary readers. I also thank Anees Ayesha, Akshay Manwani, Anwar Moazzam, Sandipan Deb, Jeff Naqvi, Sajjad Zaidi, Vamsi Vakulabharanam, M.V. Ramana, Asif Raza, Amirullah Khan, Krishna Gubili and Ashhar Farhan for critical and supportive feedback. Professor Frances ‘Fran’ Pritchett gave this book a once-over and made astute comments, for which I am grateful. None of those who gave me feedback bear any responsibility for any errors that may be present in my work, or for my often idiosyncratic choices of translation,

transliteration and representation. At the publishing end, Ambar Sahil Chatterjee has been a thoughtful and supportive commissioning editor, someone whom I have, through successive collaborations, come to trust. I also thank Shreya Dhawan and Shreya Chakravertty for editing assistance, and Gunjan Ahlawat for cover design.

I dedicate this book to Farah and Safdar and to our younger son, Sahir. Sahir does not read poetry. He does not need to. He is a poem unto himself.

PROLOGUE

Four Imagined Vignettes from Ghalib’s Life

Sojourn

A bucolic evening in February 1827. The majestic Ganges, a veritable sea unto itself, laps the prow of a sailboat making its serene way across a riverine landscape. Its deceptive calm is often interrupted by the graceful leaps of dolphins, the sudden hunting manoeuvre of a gharial, or the precise dive of a kingfisher to pluck out a whiting from the clear water. The boat is on its way to Calcutta, the grand metropolis of the east, and amongst the passengers is a restless thirty-year-old who drinks in the landscape with the unblinking eagerness of one who is making his first consequential journey.

A resident of Delhi, Mirza Asadullah Khan Baig ‘Ghalib’ has made an overland journey to Agra, visited the Avadhian capital of Lucknow, travelled to the holy city of Benaras, and on the final leg, is eagerly waiting to make landfall near Howrah. Ghalib has experienced an intellectual flowering on this journey. He has met peers of incomparable abilities, experienced different cultures and traditions and has had occasion to re-examine some of his core spiritual beliefs. The idea of Calcutta fascinates him. It is, after all, the seat of the East India Company, whose administrative reverberations have been felt in Delhi for a long time.

Ghalib’s youthful naiveté equates the British with order: metalled roads, an efficient postal system, and above all, planned transfers of authority, a bureaucratic feature that is alien to one raised on tales of the internecine brutality of Mughal succession. Like many of the credulous denizens of Shahjahanabad, he has been shielded from the acquisitive brutality of the

Company in the hinterland, experiencing it mostly through the reduction in his stipend from his feudal benefactors. Indeed, he is on his way to Calcutta to remedy that, hoping for a direct salary from the British, and to pursue a legal case involving his inheritance, about which he is in legal conflict with some of his relatives.

Ghalib has a sheaf of papers in front of him, where he has taken to scrawling his thoughts with a pencil, a precious gift bestowed upon him by a friend. The boat is too unsteady to use a dip pen, and while Ghalib has had occasion to see a fountain pen in action, he has not had the privilege of owning one. No matter. The pencil, with its sturdy wooden exterior and lead core, delights him; it will do admirably for his thoughts that tumble out chaotically at all moments, often as fully formed verses. He has been a busy poet on this trip. He composed a florid Farsi poem in the *masnawi* style while at Benaras, a feat he is especially proud of. The poem, titled *Chiragh-e-Dair* (Temple Lamp), is one of his few Farsi poems destined for greatness.

But this journey insistently calls an Urdu muse forth, one that invites him to shake off the abstruse and metaphysical and indulge in the spare parsimony of feelings. He glances at the lines he has written that very afternoon:

> *Kalkatte ka jo zikr kiya tu ne hum-nasheeN*
> *Ek teer mere seene pe mara, ke hai*
>
> When you mentioned Calcutta, sweetheart
> Oh you pierced my chest with a dart!

He determines not to finish that poem until he returns to Delhi. There will be time to reflect on the pleasures of Calcutta with the benefit of experience, rather than the imprecision of anticipated pleasure.

~

Mushaira

The night is threatening to yield to morning on 10 May 1855. A grand *mushaira* is in progress, this last Thursday before the start of the holy month of Ramadan. Miyan Fakhru, the oldest son of Bahadur Shah Zafar, presides. He is in poor health and will not last the year. Of course, peace in Delhi will not last two years, but no one is to know that yet. For the moment, Shahjahanabad is bedecked. The fountains of Chandni Chowk are awash in clear water, a happy consequence of the opening of the Ali Mardan canal that has brought water to Delhi from the Yamuna. The patissiers of Ghantewala are whipping up glorious desserts, the restaurateurs of Ajmeri Gate have invented tandoori chicken and nihari, and despite boilerplate denunciations of inebriation by the court of Bahadur Shah Zafar, a merchant near the Lahori Darwaza has a cellar that stocks the finest of ports from Portugal, luscious reds from Bordeaux and an assortment of palm wines from Rajasthan.

In the haveli of Maulvi Mohammed Baquir, the poets sit in a circle in the great hall. Maulvi Baquir has been a host beyond compare. The night had begun with the Maghrib prayer, followed by a sumptuous repast that belied his increasingly impecunious fortunes. Guests had feasted on khaibari biryani with meat so succulent that it could be scooped up with a spoon, rice grains as long as a baby's finger, and ghee that flavoured the entire room. There had been dum-pukht machhli made with the freshest rohu fish from the Yamuna, murgh Irani, the richest of chicken dishes laced with saffron, almonds and cream, and dal panchratan, baingan shirazi and dahi ka achaar for the vegetarians. Chefs at open tandoors had baked an assortment of naans and there had been drinks galore—lassi, khus sharbat, false ka ras—all chilled with real ice. Gajar ka halwa, badam burfi and frozen kulfis had made the desserts irresistible, and now that the eating is done, delectable paans are being made to order for the guests.

Ghalib of course has neither oohed nor aahed at the spread but has grumbled loudly that the puritanical and abstemious Maulvi Baquir had not only refused to serve alcohol, but had sent Ghalib a private word that the flask of cheap wine he was known to bring to such 'dry' parties would be most unwelcome in a house where the sounds of namaaz were

ubiquitous. ‘How is a poet to perform without the audience of the “daughter of grapes”?’ is his scowling refrain. But Maulana Baquir is not a man to be trifled with, so Ghalib has given in with ill grace.

The mushaira proceeds apace. A shama, a brightly burning candle, is put in front of each performer by turn, signifying their turn to recite. Seniority determines the order, and Ghalib is to be the last of the featured poets, reflecting his stature as the new poet laureate of the Mughal crown.

He has waited impatiently for this honour, which had not been accorded to him as long as his friendly rival Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq had been alive. Ghalib remembers how he had flayed his rival with many a sniggering dig of a poem, insinuating that Zauq had been made poet laureate only because he was a toady. It is only after Zauq and his other rival Hakeem Momin Khan Momin have died that he realizes how much he misses his peers, and how foolish he had been to disguise his immense respect for them. Mushairas with them had been veritable feats of poetic repartee; he has no patience for the derivative verses of the younger generation and feels isolated and alone in his respectable status as the ‘closer’. At least there is that old codger Agha Jaan Aish to hurl an occasional insult his way. Even his coarse familiarity is welcome in these desolate times.

The shama has made its way to Ghalib, startling him out of his reverie. He surveys his fellow poets, arrayed before him in a circle, waiting expectantly for what they anticipate will be exquisitely crafted but impossibly indecipherable verses. An impish desire to floor them with the most opaque of lines runs through his mischievous mind. But Ghalib is tiring of his isolation and wishes to meet his audience halfway. It is a non-traditional, ghair-tarhi mushaira after all. He has always been particular about presenting new work at these events, but decides on impulse to present older fare, a ghazal he had written over three decades ago, in 1821. He begins:

Aah ko chaahiye ek umr asar hone tak
Kaun jeeta hai teri zulf ke sar hone tak

For a sigh to be heard sometimes takes an age
Who survives while you with your stray curls engage?

He proceeds to wait for the giddy and euphoric *waah waah*s to subside.

~

Horror

It is 22 September 1857. The sky is stained scarlet by the setting sun as Ghalib stumbles home, past Gurudwara Sheesh Ganj towards Gali Qasim Jan. He cuts into by-lanes that have not yet been traversed by British soldiers and their underlings. It is not just for safety that he skirts the thoroughfare but also to avoid the horrors that the massed corpses wreak on his old eyes. In a matter of days, he has seen carnage that would have aged the young. Word has reached him that Bahadur Shah's sons Mirza Mughal and Mirza Khizr Sultan, and his grandson Mirza Abu Bakr, were shot point-blank, disembowelled and decapitated by General William Hodson's soldiers at the Khooni Darwaza. The ramparts of the Red Fort have boomed all day with periodic cannon fire, with one horrific innovation: each cannon had an unfortunate rebel tied to its mouth before it had been fired. The fountains of Chandni Chowk are choked with human entrails, the detritus of a fiendish army that had been so crazed by the memories of humiliating losses over the past four months that it had wreaked impotent but implacable revenge on any man they came across.

Ghalib had experienced the mutiny with ambivalence but had warmed up to it over time. Indeed, his beloved postal service had been disrupted, his stipend had been suspended, and the bumpkins from the east who had occupied the Red Fort exhibited none of the cultural refinements that he had trained his instincts to admire. But still, they were fiercely independent and proud folk who had given voice to a collectively felt resentment against a foreign occupying force that had begun to tear the country apart with its rapacious depredations. They had rallied under the flag of the emperor, and he had slowly aligned his loyalties to their

agenda. The Mughal court had begun to feel like an indigenous seat of power again, and Ghalib had begun to serve it as a responsible citizen.

And now, that age of imperial decorum was being destroyed with a rage that ironically legitimized it in death. The last few months felt in hindsight like the heightened consciousness of a person just as they passed from life into death. Ghalib remembered a verse by a younger poet—it might have been either Amirullah Tasleem or Shad Lakhnawi:

Jawaani se ziyaada waqt-e peeri josh hota hai
Bhadakta hai chiraagh-e subah jab khamosh hota hai

Advancing years are indeed more passionate than youth
The taper burns brightest at dawn before slowly going mute

Ghalib has been forced outdoors in these times by circumstance, searching in vain for an apothecary to minister to the pain of his brother, Mirza Yousuf, slowly dying of multiple maladies in opaque, schizophrenic isolation. He reaches home, and as he shuffles in, his wife, Umrao Begum, looks at him in anticipation. A glance at his face silences her; she sees no point in giving voice to defeat. As Mirza Yousuf dozes fitfully, Ghalib picks up his pen. ‘All I can do in the face of death is write,’ he muses grimly. ‘I wrote when my beloved adoptive son Arif died, I write when my Yousuf dies, and I will write when my Delhi dies.’

Chauk jis ko kaheN vo maqtal hai
Ghar bana hai namoona zindaaN ka
Is tarah ke visal se Ghalib
Kya mite dil se daagh hijraaN ka

The market is a battleground
And the home is but a prison
How can such meetings, Ghalib
Erase the scars of separation?

~

Departure

The night is frigid, moonless and unforgiving. It is the third of Zeeqad, in the year 1269 Hijri. An English calendar gifted to Ghalib by his friend Master Ramachandra shows the date as 14 February 1869. Ghalib had been composing an ode to Imam Husain to read at a majlis, the mournful gathering in Muharram, which is two months away. But as his pen scratches the parchment, Ghalib feels the strength leave his arm and knows that his moment is arriving.

In his own way, he is at peace. The great patriarch of Urdu poetry, whose honorifics included Dabeer-ul Mulk, the secretary, and Najm-ud Daula, the star; the lion of the neighbourhood of Ballimaran; the composer of odes to Imam Ali and verses that extolled wine, whose work would be sung in streets and plumbed for meaning by philosophers over the aeons, is dying. The next day, his bier will leave his house, ritually washed, shrouded in plain white, for a grave that will remain derelict for years before a newly sovereign nation wakes up to his greatness and turns it into a simple mausoleum. For the moment though, it is just him and Umrao at home.

He looks at her with a glance of infinite tenderness. Fifty-nine years of marital togetherness, which began when he was but a lad of thirteen and she a little girl of eleven. They have been united in sunlight and shadow, their existence an ocean of indebted want interrupted by fleeting islands of plenitude, but also a flowing stream of companionable agreement despite the eddies of conflict and argument.

Umrao has rarely been resentful of his poetic boastfulness, his ego that has cost him many a financial opportunity. But she also is the one person who has never found it necessary to defer to his wisdom. She has known him as a shy teenager, and they have learnt to communicate without words; the wistful glances they share in these final moments are devoid of empty solace and full of well-rehearsed grief. After all, seven of their children have passed away under their roof, and they have been done wailing since Arif succumbed to one of those fevers of Delhi that brooked no arguments from despairing mortals.

Ghalib senses consciousness leaving him, shyly, surreptitiously. He has marked most of the moments of his life with his poems. In keeping with

the moment, he recalls several of his verses extolling, mocking and cajoling death. As he settles to await the arrival of the *malak-ul maut*, the angel of merciful death, he hums his own verse as a catechism:

> *Gham-e hasti ka 'Asad' kis se ho juz marg ilaaj?*
> *Shama har rang meiN jalti hai sahar hone tak*
>
> What is the cure for life's sorrows save death, Asad?
> The taper burns in many hues until it is dawn.

PART I

1

The Paragon of Urdu Expression

HaiN aur bhi duniya meiN sukhanwar bahut achhe
Kahte haiN ke Ghalib ka hai andaaz-e bayaaN aur

There are many others in the world, poets truly great
Rumour has it though, Ghalib's turn of phrase stands separate!

Few writers have the privilege of being so completely associated with a language that they are simultaneously viewed not just as its most skilful exponent but also as one of its exemplars. Like Virgil with Latin or Dante with Italian, Mirza Asadullah Khan Baig 'Ghalib' (1797–1869) is rightfully seen as the paragon of Urdu expression. His verses were written in original prototypes of rhyme and metre that have been imitated by other poets for almost two centuries. His turns of phrase are the stuff of proverbs. His prose, as exemplified by his letters, provides a refreshing down-to-earth counterpoint to his ornate poetry, and his book on the 1857 rebellion puts him in the company of the historians of his time. Indeed, like Mir Taqi Mir before him, Ghalib is not just a brick in the wall of Urdu poetry but one of its foundations.

What makes Ghalib so unique? By now, all his poetic output has been plumbed by scholars, other poets and fans for metaphorical hints and allegorical insights. His poetry was at times super accessible and at other times impenetrable. He could write the most playful verses about mangoes and the most opaque poems about the nature of existence.

Arguably, the Ghalib era symbolized the peak of Urdu *sukhan*, its literary expression. Ghalib took Urdu poetry by the scruff of its neck and shook it into a new order with his incredible riffs on philosophy, love and

politics. Despite his cantankerous nature and his obsession with writing in Farsi (which led him sometimes to devalue his own Urdu poetry), he was fortunate enough to be recognized as a genius in his own time. In the century and a half since his death, he has reached the status of a colossus on the poetic landscape of Urdu. More copies of the *Divaan-e Ghalib* have been printed than of any other book in the history of Urdu literature, and Ghalib's verse may be the most translated of all Urdu writing, in the most number of languages.

Not only was Ghalib a great poet, but he was also a marker of a new era that was a work-in-progress during his lifetime. His life mirrors the fault lines between the age of tradition and the era of modernity. He lived in a world that grappled with the ingress of technology and capitalism into Indian society and witnessed foundational changes, both progressive (the introduction of the printing press and the postal system) and cataclysmic (1857 and its aftermath). His engagement with these developments and events provides us with an interesting insight into how his society was responding to these transformations.

Ghalib Ki Dilli

The historian Giovanni Arrighi has referred to the period starting in the 1870s and continuing into the 2000s as the 'long twentieth century', referring to a particular phase of capital accumulation and state formation. In similar fashion, and moving beyond artificial temporal milestones, we could refer to the period from 1707 to 1857 as the 'long eighteenth century' of India. That era was bookended on one side by the death of Aurangzeb and on the other by the formal takeover of India by the British crown following the *ghadar,* the rebellion that we now read in hindsight as the first birth pangs of a free country. Ghalib lived through the second half of this long century and chronicled the shock of its sudden end in a language suffused with lyrical nostalgia and layered with his reflections about its significance in the broader context.

The subcontinent that had been unified under Aurangzeb into a single kingdom began to break apart shortly after his death. Delhi remained the epicentre of the seismic shifts that buffeted the country. The Persian king Nader Shah attacked from the north-west in 1739, carving out the Afghan regions from Mughal control. The British established a beachhead in Bengal after the victory of Major General Robert Clive of the East India Company over Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The kingdom of Mysore became autonomous in the 1750s with Sultan Hyder Ali Khan and his son Tipu Sultan asserting their sovereignty. The nizam of Hyderabad, who was notionally a Mughal subject, stopped being beholden to the Mughal emperor roughly at the same time. Maharaja Ranjit Singh built up a Sikh empire in 1800, and the Balkanization of the subcontinent continued unabated, a phenomenon that the British exploited through a series of military campaigns, political co-optation and long-term strategies that produced spectacular dividends in their southward and eastward march towards the colonial domination of the subcontinent.

In the century and a half between 1707 and 1857, the Mughal empire counted fourteen kings who came and went in a depressing cycle of ineffective rule and brutal overthrow. In the late 1700s, it was the locus of struggles between the Afghans led by Ahmed Shah Abdali, the Marathas led by Yashwantrao Holkar, and the British. Matters ended decisively for Delhi in 1803 with the defeat of the Marathas by General Gerard Lake in the second Anglo-Maratha war. The battles between the British and the Afghans would continue throughout the nineteenth century, as part of what became known as ‘the great game’, where global powers treated Afghanistan as a staging ground for larger global struggles.

Delhi, as the launching pad for British operations in the north-western part of the subcontinent, became extremely important for the British crown. Once the British defeated the Marathas, they quietly began entrenching themselves as the de facto rulers of the region, setting up Nawab Shah Alam II as a figurehead. Nobody was fooled, and the ironic jibe that floated in the streets of Delhi made fun of his name ‘Shah Alam’ (the ruler of the world) thus: *Sultanat-e Shah Alam, az Dilli ta Palam* (the

reign of the king of the world extends from Delhi to Palam). Even granting him this twenty-kilometre stretch was a generous concession. The British appointed David Ochterlony, a senior manager with the East India Company, as the first British Resident of Delhi. He set up headquarters in Mehrauli, fixed a stipend for the king and called all the shots. The East India Company slowly shifted the centre of operations away from the Red Fort, and a series of Residents established administrative operations in the region till the practice was abandoned in 1857, when India was formally brought under the rule of the British crown.

Ghalib's Early Days

In the midst of this turmoil, Ghalib was born in Agra in 1797 to a family of soldiers, a matter he was very proud of. His maternal grandfather, Khwaja Ghulam Hasan Khan, was perhaps the most famous of his ancestors and had been granted the title of Kamin Dan (commander). His maternal uncle, Nasrullah Baig, served briefly as a subedar (the equivalent of a British captain) in Agra. His paternal ancestors were of Turkish stock; his grandfather had arrived in India through Samarkand.

Ghalib's childhood was spent in Agra in the environment of the vernacular Urdu. Sometimes it went by its earlier name, Rekhta, and remained far removed from Delhi's courtly Persianized fare. Agra was the land of Nazeer Akbarabadi, the troubadour of the masses, whose songs about bazaars and festivals rang with a homespun cadence and whose idiom helped unify a variety of minor dialects into an emerging language. Rumour has it that Ghalib was tutored by the great Nazeer himself in his early days.

It was a matter of pride for Ghalib that his life overlapped with that of another giant of Urdu poetry, Mir Taqi Mir, the man who came to be known as the Khuda-e Sukhan (God of Poetry). Mir was the only poet whose work Ghalib deferred to and whose spiritual debt he acknowledged along with that of Sufi scholars such as Bedil Dehlavi (1642–1720), whose

Farsi poetry was known to have inaugurated an ‘Indian style’ (*sabk-e Hendi*).

Tragedy befell Ghalib’s family in 1801 when his father was killed in a botched militia action in Alwar. The four-year-old Ghalib was initially sheltered because his uncle Nasrullah Baig received a generous stipend of Rs 1700 a month from the British. Unfortunately, lightning struck the family twice. Nasrullah Baig died in a freak fall from a horse in 1805, and the stipend died with him. It was eventually restored but only partially, and Ghalib’s immediate family received a mere sixty-two rupees and eight annas each month.

Ghalib’s Marriage and Youth

Ghalib was married at the age of thirteen to eleven-year-old Umrao Begum, the daughter of Ilahi Baksh Maroof, a lower-level nobleman in Delhi, and eventually moved to the capital. His father-in-law was a poet and a man of relatively better means than Ghalib’s immediate family. Seeing few opportunities for his son-in-law in Agra, he invited him to move to Delhi. Ghalib and Umrao, however, did spend a few years in Agra before moving. Despite differences in temperament, Umrao being rather religious and Ghalib a bit of a libertine, they appeared to have been quite a well-adjusted couple. Their relationship was marked by levity. For example, Ghalib is reputed to have brought home a large cache of liquor. When Umrao asked him where he got the money for it, he said he had spent his stipend on it. ‘God has promised food for His subjects, so I am not worried. But he did not promise them wine, so I have made my own arrangements.’ She threw him out, liquor and all. He eventually returned, with his shoes in his hand. When she asked him why, he said, ‘Since this house has been turned into a mosque by you, I need to take appropriate precautions.’ She began to smile and all was well. This is pure unsubstantiated anecdote, but sometimes, anecdotes have a way of turning into myth, and fleshing out the contours of history. So let us suspend disbelief every now and then.

While in Agra, the young Ghalib studied philosophy, astronomy and Arabic along with other subjects. He claimed to have benefited from instruction at the hand of one Maulana Abdus Samad Horzmud, an eminent Iranian émigré, but the odds are that this ‘tutor’ was a fake invented decades later by Ghalib to bolster his claim of special access to Persian, which, if true, would be entirely consistent with his personality. At any rate, Ghalib is reported to have written his first ghazal when he was eleven, using the pen name (*takhallus*) ‘Asad’. He would adopt the takhallus ‘Ghalib’ in 1816, but continued to use ‘Asad’ on occasion.

Ghalib was known to be handsome and took great pride in his appearance. In his youth, he preferred long hair and a clean-shaven face. He dressed in manners appropriate to the fashion of his time, wearing spotless kurtas and a muslin cap in the summer and woollen attire in the winter. Financial insecurity did not rob him of sophisticated tastes. He was also a man of set opinions, which he expressed with a certitude bordering on pomposity. He was known to have a roving eye in his Agra years and implied that a woman had died because of unrequited love for him. In a letter written in his old age, he recounted the event: ‘In my time, I too was cruel, and made a beautiful songstress suffer. May god’s peace be with her . . . Forty years have passed and now I have abjured such actions, but the memory of that girl’s wondrous ways often haunts me. I shall never forget her death.’ In all likelihood, this story was an apocryphal boast, but it hints at Ghalib’s memories of a hedonistic life in Agra.

Ghalib was around sixteen years old when he moved to Delhi. He had imagined it would be for a short period, while his pension issues were sorted out. Fate of course had other plans, and his move to the capital ended up being a permanent one. Umrao’s cousin Buniyadi Begum was generous enough to gift them a house in Gali Qasim Jan, so despite their poverty, they were at least not homeless.

Dilli Ke Ghalib

When Ghalib moved to Delhi, the capital was in a state of calm between eras of tumult. The memories of the famine of 1782 that had wiped out over a quarter of its population were fresh in people's minds, and the mood in the capital was austere in the extreme. Employment opportunities were hard to come by, and the circles of patronage that had been common in the heyday of Mughal rule were steadily drying up.

Ghalib set up residency in the walled city of Shahjahanabad and attempted to eke out a living as a poet and a man of leisure. Being a man of leisure, of course, was hard work. Egos had to be massaged, rivals quelled. One had to know the unwritten rules of behaviour amongst the poets of Delhi and the aristocrats of Shahjahanabad, the court customs at the Red Fort, and above all, the emerging bureaucratic traditions of British rule. There were Mughals and Rajputs, Rohillas and Jats, British and French, men and women, nobility and commoners, all manner of entities and a bewildering array of customs to contend with. Luckily, Ghalib had charm and social skills to spare, though his ego sometimes proved to be a major obstacle to his advancement.

Ghalib's early days in Delhi were consumed by an increasingly desperate effort to have his stipend raised. He felt he had been duped by his relative, the nawab of Loharu, Ahmad Baksh Khan. The latter's estate had been asked to provide Ghalib's extended family an annual stipend of 10,000 rupees, but had reduced it to 3000, of which Ghalib's immediate family received 750 rupees.

Ghalib's penurious state in Delhi forced him to take up his case seriously. British records show that he wrote several eloquent letters to an array of authorities pleading with them to rectify the matter. He took his status as a beneficiary of inherited largess for granted and was possessed of a sense of entitlement that was increasingly at odds with the straitened circumstances of his feudal benefactors and the shifting priorities of the new administration.

He began flourishing as a poet in Delhi, appearing regularly in local mushairas in the Delhi circuit, swiftly establishing a name for himself. He was treated with respect in the highest corridors of Mughal power. His

opinion on matters of poetry was held in high regard, and people began to cajole him to bring out a divaan[1] of his work. He was known to be generous with both his time and his money; anecdotes of his charitable nature abound. His philosophy was to give before being asked: *be-talab deN to maza us meiN siva milta hai; vo gada jis ko na ho khoo-e savaal achcha hai* (the joy of giving without being asked is unique; the beggar who does not have the need to beg is a welcome sight).

The one problem with such behaviour was that Ghalib, in his hobnobbing with the social elite and being profligate with his charity, had to spend a lot of money to keep up appearances, well above his income. He began to spiral into debt, far more so when his father-in-law, a pillar of financial support, died in 1826.

He doesn't appear to have spent any time doing physical labour or seeking any manner of paid employment. It was only later in life that he served as a tutor to the rich, the famous and the gifted. He sought what he felt was his just due and spent his youth railing against his relatives, alternately cajoling and scolding a variety of administrators from Delhi to Calcutta, and pressing his case with the determined obduracy of someone unable to recognize a lost cause. Ghalib's case offers a window into the fast-changing relations of feudal governance. To put it succinctly, British influence waxed as Mughal sovereignty waned. Ghalib, wise to these power shifts, pursued his rights in British courts.

Trip Eastward

As part of his fruitless quest to have his stipend increased, Ghalib decided to travel eastward. His attempts to secure a satisfactory audience with Baronet Charles Metcalf, the British Resident, while the latter was at Delhi had failed. In October 1826, Ghalib tried to meet the Resident in Kanpur and set off on a trip that would last three years. He stayed for a few months each at Kanpur, Lucknow and Benaras before reaching Calcutta in February 1828. He finally managed to secure an audience with the new governor-general of India, Lord William Bentinck, in February 1829. Not

much appears to have come out of his trip but having met the top British bureaucrat in the land, he returned, if not satisfied, at least mollified. He reached Delhi in November 1829.

While Ghalib felt his case was strong, his opponents had the ear of the British. Needless to say, he lost. His many trips to different seats of power and his eloquent epistles notwithstanding, he received word in early 1831 that his appeal had been rejected, and his claims to any inheritance from his uncle's property had been declared null and void. It was a crushing blow, which he described in a letter as 'a murder of a universe of hope' that 'turned my honour into dust'.

Sorry though this episode was, it may have been a blessing in disguise for Ghalib. His constant petitioning turned him into one of the era's biggest patrons of the nascent postal service; an association that he used throughout his life to develop what in hindsight became an important element of Urdu prose. His letters have acquired a high status in Urdu literature. These letters, which help flesh out Ghalib's character, are extremely popular even today and contain a spectrum of reflections including opinions on mundane day-to-day affairs, musings on mangoes,[2] literary criticism, exegesis on his own poetry and that of others, and comments on historical and political events.

The long trip added many dimensions to his personality. During his three-year sojourn, he had the opportunity to interact with a variety of his peers. While in Lucknow, he became familiar with the works of Mir Anees and Mirza Dabeer who were taking the tradition of *marsiya*, the elegy, to stratospheric heights. Shia devotional poetry moved him monumentally and deepened his connection to Imam Ali, a progenitor of most Sufi orders. He developed a rudimentary understanding of Hindu philosophy during a visit to Benaras. He took in Hindu devotional practices, made sense of Bhakti traditions of worship and made important connections between Islamic and Hindu religious practices. In his poem *Chiragh-e-Dair* (Temple Lamp), he described the city thus:

Ibaadat-khaana-e naaqusiyaan ast
Hamaana Kaaba-e Hindostaan ast

It is the prayer house of the conch blowers
Verily, it is the Kaaba of India

His trip to Calcutta gave Ghalib further insight into the interactions between Western modernity and Hindu metaphysics. He loved Calcutta not only for its orderliness, but for the rationalist temper that infused the city. The conversations between Hindus and Christians were much more on an equal footing there, unlike in Delhi, where a virulent strain of evangelism had taken hold, and the natives were treated as heathens. Out east, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was ascendant, and the first assembly of the Brahmo Sabha (the precursor of the Brahmo Samaj), which would be held in August 1828, was being planned. Old cultural practices were being publicly debated, and progressive Hindus were unsparing in their self-criticism.

Ghalib eagerly took in all these influences. Already primed due to his exposure to the Bhakti poets of Benaras, he embraced the ideas of *vahdat-ul vujood*, a belief in a unifying divinity that could accommodate all faiths. In his words:

Hum muvahhid haiN, hamaara kaish hai tark-e rusoom
MillateN jab mit gayeeN, ajza-e eemaaN ho gayeeN

We are unitarians, rejection of rituals is our brief
Where sectarian differences end, there begins true belief

After Calcutta

By the time he returned to Delhi in 1829, Ghalib had become a full-blown Sufi, but one with all manner of ecumenical and modernist influences. He was scornful of Muslim orthodoxy, especially the Ahl-e Hadith (People of Prophetic Utterance) movement that had emerged in Delhi, which was beholden to Saudi Wahabism and counted Ghalib's friend and fellow poet Momin amongst its sympathizers. Ghalib's poetry began to take a defiant anti-religious overtone:

Dekhiyo Ghalib se gar uljha kiyo

Hai vali posheeda aur kaafir khula

Watch out if you should ever with Ghalib meet
Saint in disguise, else an infidel complete

He had returned to Delhi wiser but poorer. His debts amounted to sixty times his annual income. He was hounded by creditors and even ordered jailed (a sentence later commuted to house arrest). Around 1833, he put together his definitive divaan, which lay unpublished for eight years. He was a regular in the mushairas of Delhi, of which there were many. The palace conducted two mushairas a month at the Red Fort, and the Delhi College held a monthly event, while several smaller, private mushairas were held in homes and havelis. Poets and connoisseurs quickly became acquainted with Ghalib's poetic genius, though that did not lead to any immediate financial gains.

Ghalib had a pyrrhic victory of sorts in 1835 when his legal opponents suffered a precipitous decline in their fortunes. Nawab Shamsuddin, the elder son of the late Ahmad Baksh Khan and Ghalib's adversary in his pension case, was executed by the British for alleged complicity in the murder of the British Resident, William Fraser. However, Ghalib's personal fortunes did not improve.

Another minor setback to Ghalib related to the matter of Mughal succession. In 1837, after the death of Emperor Akbar the Second, Bahadur Shah Zafar ascended the throne with the usual internecine squabbles that characterized Mughal succession, albeit on a smaller and bloodless scale. In a miscalculation, Ghalib had supported the claims of Zafar's opponent Mirza Salim, and he paid for it dearly as the new king appointed Ghalib's rival Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq as his poet laureate, depriving Ghalib of a potentially lucrative seat. Ghalib was persona non grata in the Red Fort for a long time, though he did worm his way back in through a series of strategic odes written in the king's honour. The process took well over an impoverished decade. His relative lack of contacts amongst the powerful cost him dearly as well when he was

arrested and jailed in 1847 on a gambling charge, a sentence so harsh for a minor crime that it seems to have been a form of petty vengeance.

Perhaps out of sympathy for Ghalib, a benefactor, Miyan Nasiruddin (aka Kaley Shah), offered him a house to stay in. Kaley Shah also pulled some strings and had Ghalib appointed to the court in a minor capacity in 1847. Eventually Ghalib was granted honorifics that were appropriate to his stature, such as Najm-ud Daula (star of the kingdom) and Dabeer-ul Mulk (the secretary of the realm). However, Ghalib's bitterness at his long exile from the court found expression in his poetry and got him into trouble with the king.

In 1854, Ghalib was chosen to be the ustad (teacher) of the heir apparent, Mirza Fakhru. He was finally elevated to the status of the court's poet laureate and by extension, the ustad of the king himself, following the death of Zauq that same year. The nawab of Oudh also offered a pension to Ghalib, whose financial situation started improving, leading to a three-year period of relative security and comfort. He ate meat every day, drank chilled almond syrup in the morning and expensive wine at night, paid a retinue of servants and pupils and even made the odd income tax payment to the administration. Happily, his appointment to the court meant he went back to writing mostly in Urdu.

The era of severely curtailed Mughal power during the two decades of Zafar's monarchy produced a flowering of sorts in the court at the Red Fort. Courtly customs were the touchstone of good manners, and painting, calligraphy, music and poetry were discussed at leisure in a court that served no real administrative role, and perhaps as a consequence of its powerlessness, was even more committed to refined comportment and style.

The Ghadar

The calm of Delhi, and indeed of Ghalib's life, came crashing down on a scarlet summer night, which Ghalib marked as the sixteenth of Ramadan, 1273 AH. On that day, 11 May 1857, soldiers from the Meerut cantonment

marched into Delhi, killed every Englishman they could find and declared themselves as part of an independent nation, with the octogenarian Zafar as their emperor.

The mutiny had been years in the making. The British had begun to extract greater and greater tribute from the Indian hinterland, leading to untold misery. The Doctrine of Lapse promulgated by the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie in 1848 had sought to annex princely states whose rulers died heirless. The nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, had been deposed in 1856 and his princely state annexed. The agents of the East India Company had exacted tax with unprecedented brutality during times of famine, and Indian soldiers in British barracks were being treated poorly. There were rumours that the recently introduced Enfield 1853 rifle had beef and pork tallow in its cartridges, a concern that the British refused to recognize or allay. In March 1857, a mutinous soldier named Mangal Pandey was hanged in Barrackpore, lighting a torch of rebellion that spread westward. On 10 May, the final domino fell when the soldiers at the Meerut barracks revolted and rode to Delhi, seeking a figurehead leader to cement disparate revolts into a war of independence.

For a little over four months, Delhi was taken over by the rebels. The residents of the walled city were mute spectators as their lives were upended by events beyond their control but quickly adapted and accommodated their new visitors from the east. Ghalib continued to attend court and even wrote a *qaseeda,* a poetic paean, in praise of the king's victory, but it is clear that he felt overwhelmed by the turn of events. He took to recording the various incidents that marked the rebellion and its aftermath, which were eventually published in a book titled *Dastambu* (A Fistful of Flowers). That account appeared in 1858, after the British had reconquered Delhi, and reflects his careful attempts not to run afoul of the returning rulers, and its ambivalences must be understood in that context.

It is safe to say that Ghalib, like most of his counterparts, was distressed by the events that followed the recapture of Delhi by the British. Their savage cruelties purged any residual loyalties he may have felt towards them, and he learnt to be circumspect in his future engagements with

them. The entries in his diary from September 1857 describe the events with unsparing detail: ‘when the wrathful lion-hearts entered the city, they felt free to slaughter the defenceless and burn their houses . . .’ He wrote of how his neighbours lived without water for days, and of his bereavement at the loss of his beloved brother, Yousuf Mirza, who was deprived of treatment and consigned to a slow death in Ghalib’s house: ‘My eyes have seen nothing but tears, may they forever be caked shut with dust . . .’ He also wrote of the trouble he had while trying to give his brother a decent burial: ‘How can a Muslim join with two or three friends and shoulder to shoulder carry a corpse to burial? My neighbours took pity on my loneliness . . . they washed the body, wrapped it in a few white sheets and in a mosque near his house, dug a hole in the ground.’

Not everyone was so fortunate, for ‘about the princes, not much can be said, some fell to bullets, some were sent to the jaws of the monster of death, the souls of others were snuffed out by the hangman’s noose, some languish in prison, while others run aimlessly on the face of the earth, His Highness is under trial, and the noblemen of Jhajjar and Ballabgadh, as well as the rulers of Farrukhabad have been hung on separate days on the gallows tree . . .’

The British treated the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid with utter contempt, destroying many buildings and repurposing others into barracks and quarters. Zafar was tried, found guilty and exiled to Rangoon. Many of his sons and relatives were summarily executed and there were reports of large-scale rape. The nightmare of Delhi had begun.

British Rule

With the advent of the ghadar, Ghalib’s short-lived period of financial stability ended abruptly. While the city limped back to order, his stipends from the court ceased. Between 1857 and 1860, he had few sources of income, presumably making do on the kindness of relatives and distant benefactors such as the nawab of Rampur. In 1860, the British finally restored some of his pension, but things were difficult in the era of post-

mutiny inflation. All Ghalib had each month was the sixty-two rupees and eight annas he received from the British, supplemented by a hundred rupees that the nawab of Rampur sent intermittently.

Ghalib made the most of his situation and even found ways to make light of it. In a letter to his young friend Mirza Alauddin Ahmed dated 28 July 1862, he writes with a veritable twinkle in his eye: ‘Give my salaams to my brother [the recipient’s father] and tell him, those days are gone when one could take a loan here from Mathura Das, attack Darbari Mal for another there, and loot Khubchand Chainsukh’s house for a third. Everyone accepted my sealed note of request, which was of course useless, for I repaid neither principal nor interest. My aunt paid for some expenses, I got a bit from Khan, a little from Alwar and occasionally something from mother in Agra. Now it is me, and sixty-two rupees and eight annas, along with a hundred from Rampur. The only one who will give me credit now demands interest month on month. From that, I have to pay income tax, the guard, the interest, the principal, the upkeep of wife and children, my pupils, all in one hundred and sixty-two rupees. I am frustrated. It is nigh impossible to live like this. What can I do? I cut out the morning drink, halved meat rations and stopped drinking wine at night. That saved twenty or twenty-two rupees, and there was some room in the budget. Friends asked, “How long can you continue like this?” I said, “Till god demands it.” They asked, “If you do not drink wine, how will you live?” I said, “The way god wills me to.” But suddenly, Rampur sent some money greater than my expectations. Some debt was repaid. Morning drinks and wine began anew, and meat was added back to the grocery list . . .’ This dark humour masked the reality that from 1857 onwards, Ghalib’s life was a struggle for survival, leading him to vacillate between cautious optimism and dark pessimism.

Squabbles and Fame

Despite his financial troubles, Ghalib continued to court controversy, principally on account of his lack of tact and his tendency to overreach

himself in areas that were not his expertise. One particular incident is illustrative of Ghalib's personality. A noted scholar from the Deccan named Maulvi Mohammed Hussain Tabrizi had written an influential Farsi dictionary in the seventeenth century titled *Burhaan-e Qati* (Conclusive Proof), which had been used as a definitive reference volume by most Farsi scholars in the subcontinent. Fancying himself an authority on Farsi, Ghalib published a work titled *Qati-e Burhaan* (Proof Conclusive) in 1862, a highly intemperate critique of the venerable author, and as if to add insult to injury, one that was relatively carelessly written and riddled with errors.

This proved to be a mistake. For one, Tabrizi had several admirers, who were riled by Ghalib's critique, especially its tone. Also, Ghalib had already alienated several people in the Urdu/Persian literary circles with his cantankerous nature and his attitude of superiority. Sensing an opening, his opponents piled calumny upon him with glee that bordered on schadenfreude, and Ghalib found himself bitterly defensive for years. It did not help that he constantly invoked his status as a high-born person and disparaged his rivals for being commoners, thus provoking further attacks. Eventually, he was stung enough to appeal to higher authorities, suing his rivals for defamation in a British court. It was a sorry spectacle.

However, his stature continued to grow, as did his popularity among the masses. His Urdu divaan was released in a fifth edition, and the newly inaugurated Nawal Kishore Press of Lucknow published his Farsi divaan in 1863. In 1868, a collection of his letters was published under the title *Ud-e Hindi* (Indian Perfume). The bard of India was being firmly recognized as a genius in his lifetime.

Twilight of the Giant

Ghalib's health began to fail him in the late 1860s. His last few years were spent worrying about his relatives. The children of his late adopted son, Arif, were now married, and he was being pulled into their marital disputes. Many of his contemporaries had died, and his younger friends,

such as Master Ramachandra of Delhi College, were not poets, even if they were intellectuals in their own right. He wrote little poetry during this period, but his published work—both prose and poetry—circulated more than ever as a result of the increase in supply and demand of printed work. Eventually, on 15 January 1869, the great bard of Delhi breathed his last, fittingly in the same year that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in distant Porbandar. One great Indian stalwart was born just as another passed into history.

2

The Half-Believer Sufi

Ye masaail-e tasawwuf ye tera bayaan, Ghalib
Tujhe hum wali samajhte jo na baada-khwaar hota

These Sufi-like discussions, and your speech, Ghalib, you thinker
We'd have considered you a saint, had you not been a drinker

Ghalib was a self-proclaimed Sufi, but one who bucked religious custom and dictum with a mischievous insouciance. This wasn't particularly rare given the spiritual landscape of nineteenth-century India. Ghalib came of age at a time when religious thought in northern India was experiencing a tumultuous churning. On the one hand, Christian proselytizers were making inroads into the Indian socio-cultural landscape. A number of prominent thinkers such as Ghalib's young friend Master Ramachandra, Abdul Masih of Delhi, Begum Samru from Meerut and Michael Madhusudan Dutt from Calcutta had converted to Christianity, leading to a variety of debates amongst people of his time on the nature of monotheism, the politics of evangelism and the implications of inter-religious interaction.

Within Islam, the austere Ahl-e Hadith movement that began in eighteenth-century Arabia had reached the subcontinental shores and was in contentious dialogue with the more spiritually inclined Sunni traditions. The Shias, devoted to Imam Ali and Imam Husain, were a growing influence within Islam, and the poetry of Mir Anees and Mirza Dabeer of Lucknow had turned the epic elegy (marsiya) into a powerful poetic form that underscored the values of humanism, heroism and sacrifice. Sikhism, drawing from strands of both Muslim and Hindu traditions, offered a new

theology, and with the establishment of the Sikh empire, provided political support for the faith. Within Hinduism, Bhakti poets were ascendant in Benaras, while the Brahmo Samaj movement was beginning to articulate its ideas in Bengal.

Ghalib was a privileged spectator and sometimes spirited participant in many of these debates, and his own spiritual attitude was influenced by them. His three-year sojourn beyond the boundaries of Delhi exposed him to different spiritual traditions, and his engagement with them finds expression in his prose and poetry and provides us with incomparable insights, not only into his personality and literary oeuvre, but also into the spiritual temper of his time.

Ghalib's Affinity with Hinduism

> *Zunnaar baandh subba-e sad-daana tod daal*
> *Rahrau chale hai raah ko hamvaar dekh kar*
>
> Tie on the sacred thread and let your prayer beads scatter
> To the wayfarer, a smoother terrain is what should matter

Ghalib's affinity with Hindu spirituality was a result of his life experiences. As his letters show, many of his friends and acquaintances were Hindus, and he shared a deep and affectionate relationship with several of them. These included Mahesh Das (who sent him frequent gifts of wine), Munshi Bansidhar (a friend from Agra with whom he played chess), Master Ramachandra (an academic), Shiv Ji Ram (a student, 'like a son to me') and Hira Singh ('a man with a good heart and a great name'). There was, of course, his beloved friend Har Gopal Tafta, to whom many of his letters were addressed. In one letter to Tafta dated 23 December 1859, Ghalib writes, 'I hold all humanity to be my family, and consider all men, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, to be my brothers.' Such sentiment, not uncommon in those times, found vivid expression in the verses of this master poet and played a role in cutting through the barriers that divided religions. In Ghalib's ghazals, the stock character of the 'barahman' stood

in for practising Hindus and was often referred to in respectful or affectionate terms. In a famous couplet, he says:

> *Vafaadaari ba shart-e- ustuvaari asl-e eemaaN hai*
> *Marey but-khaane meiN to Kaabe meiN gaado barahman ko*
>
> Loyalty is the essence of faith as long as it is steadfast
> If he dies in the temple, bury the barahman in the Kaaba

The loyalty of the barahman to his faith meets with Ghalib's approval and grants him pride of place alongside the most pious of Muslims. In Ghalib's poetry, the barahman and the shaikh, his counterpart in Islam, face the same tests of loyalty, love and constancy. His poems abound in verses where the terms 'shaikh' and 'barahman' are often used together, signalling a shared spirituality. The barahman occasionally functions as a soothsayer:

> *Dekhiye paate haiN ushshaaq butoN se kya faiz*
> *Ek barahman ne kaha hai ke ye saal achcha hai*
>
> What victories may beleaguered lovers expect from their idols?
> Let us see, a holy man has predicted a good year

In his Farsi poetry, Ghalib sometimes longed for the freedom of worship provided by the 'temples of India and China' (*butkhaana-haaye Hind-o Cheen*) as opposed to the constraints of his own faith (*dilam dar Kaaba az tangi giraft*, my heart feels trapped in the confines of Kaaba). *Chiragh-e-Dair* (Temple Lamp), written in 1827, is fulsome and gushing in its praise for the holy city of Benaras. Overall, the influence of Hindu mythos and logos is built into many a line of Ghalib's prose and poetry in an unselfconscious manner that reflects his desire for a non-adversarial and equal dialogue between the faiths.

Ghalib the Sufi

Sufi thought in India dates back to the early days of the Delhi sultanate, around 700 years before Ghalib's time. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (d. 1236), who is interred in Ajmer, and Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325) of Delhi were idealized figures in Indo-Islamic mythography, and saints who followed them produced an array of Sufi orders or *tariqa*s throughout the subcontinent. Sufi thought overlaid Islamic gnosis with other faith traditions, and reflecting its Iranian origins, contained a variety of metaphors from Zoroastrian thought. In the subcontinent, Sufism influenced and was influenced by the Bhakti tradition of Indian devotion. It relied on song to spread its message and therefore attracted poets to its fold. Since Sufis frequently ran afoul of the ruling class, they were often beleaguered and oppressed. Many among their pantheon of saints were martyred, such as Mansour Hallaj, who was executed by the Abbasid caliph Al-Muqtadir on the charge of apostasy in the tenth century, Nurullah Shustari, who was put to death by Mughal emperor Jahangir in 1611 CE, and Sarmad Kashani, who was killed on the order of Aurangzeb in 1661 CE.

The Sufis' belief that the individual could only know god through personal experience of the divine without the intercession of the clergy was a direct threat to the religious establishment, which often tried to put down the Sufis with brute force. Many Sufi saints were executed on the charge of apostasy, but their popularity often soared after their deaths, resulting in shrines at their tombs and stories about their miracles.

Ghalib grew up on legends like that of Sarmad Kashani, who is buried in a shrine close to the Jama Masjid. It is reputed that when Sarmad was asked to recite the kalma, the statement of faith (the first line of which is *la-ilaha illallah*, there is no god but Allah), he started by saying *la ilaha* (there is no god) but refused to complete it. Sarmad explained himself thus: 'currently I am drowned in negation and have not yet achieved the state of affirmation. In this state, to utter the entire kalma would be a lie.' For this act of defiance, which was deemed heretical, Sarmad was beheaded.[1] The legend goes that his body picked up its own head and walked seven steps up the stairway of Jama Masjid. The seven steps are

believed to have marked the seven times Delhi was destined to be invaded and sacked.

Stories such as Sarmad's produced a stirring passion within the adherents of Sufism, who cut across class boundaries. Religion took on a popular and accessible form and did not rely on the supervision of any clergy. Ghalib was moved by the tales of Sufis who faced their impending death with stoic dignity and sometimes with pleasurable anticipation (*eid-e nazzara hai shamsheer ka uriyaaN hona*, it is a festival for the eyes, the sight of the naked sword). Stories of Sufi martyrdom merged seamlessly in his mind with the iconic Islamic story of the sacrifice of Imam Husain, the Prophet's grandson, at Karbala, and produced exuberant accounts of the martyrdom narrative. Sometimes he imagined himself as the joyous subject of sacrifice:

> *Tegh dar kaf kaf ba lab aata hai qaatil is taraf*
> *Muzhdabaad ai aarzoo-e marg-e Ghalib muzhdabaad*
>
> Sword ready, with foaming lips, advances the killer
> Bravo! Your desire for death, Ghalib, bravo!

Ghalib borrowed a number of metaphors from Sufism for his ghazals. Some of them are:

> *Aaina*, or the mirror. This is used as a metaphor for the heart and also for the universe that is reflected therein. The pure heart is therefore a polished mirror in which the truth of the world is revealed. A mirror is also honest in that it reflects reality without prejudice.
>
> *Haq*, literally 'the truth'. This is also a synonym for god. Sufi spirituality often located god inside the believer. Mansour al Hallaj is reported to have declared '*an-al haq*', which could mean 'I am the truth', or 'I am god', for which he was charged with apostasy and killed.
>
> *Hairat* or astonishment. Hairat grows in the human consciousness as more and more of the divine, or the essence of beauty, is revealed.
>
> *Fana/baqa*, representing the dual nature of destruction and preservation. Sufis believe that one must destroy the self to exalt the spirit.

Tariqa, which is the path that one must traverse and symbolizes one's philosophy and beliefs. At a collective level, a tariqa becomes an order, a school of Sufism.

Jalwa, which exemplifies the revelation of god to humanity. The revelation of the divine to Moses on Mount Sinai is considered the most paradigmatic of jalwa, the plural of which is *tajalliyat.*

Kamaal or *insaan-e kaamil,* the state of human perfection or the perfect human. Prophet Mohammad or Imam Ali are often revered by the Sufis as being the idealized form of humanity.

Maarefat or gnosis, which is a form of spiritual understanding that is beyond conventional modes of 'knowledge'. Maarefat is considered a superior form of *eeman* or belief, incorporating an organic understanding of the entity in whom faith is placed.

Ishq, which is an all-encompassing form of love, far more intense than mere *mohabbat.* Ishq is pure, unlike *hawas,* a base form of attraction.

Noor, which is the divine light, which makes up the pure soul. God is seen as light, as are truth, beauty and revelation.

Tamanna, or desire, which can turn into the more intense *junoon* (madness).

Shaahed (witness), one who bears witness to the divine. A related word, *shaheed*, means martyr, and *shahaadat* means both the act of bearing witness and martyrdom in the service of truth and faith.

Many of these ideas, in various permutations and combinations, suffuse Ghalib's poetry. Take for instance the following couplet:

Kis ka junoon-e deed tamanna shikaar tha
Aaina-khaana vadi-e gauhar ghubaar tha

Whose mad gaze slew my passion?
The house of mirrors was but a valley of dust

This can be, and has been, read in different ways. To take but one interpretation, let us look at the couplet from the point of view of god, the possible subject of the first words, '*kis ka*' (whose). We could read Ghalib as saying that god's desire (tamanna) to be known and admired reached a level of madness (junoon) and led to the creation of the universe, the

house of mirrors (aaina-khaana). But that house of mirrors, though it shimmers like a valley of jewels (vadi-e gauhar), eventually turns out to be nothing but a desert full of sand and dust (ghubaar). God's desire to produce a perfect world is thwarted, perhaps by human imperfection and folly. An entirely different meaning can perhaps emerge if we take a human as the subject and play with the imagery in the poem. In this version, human desire to know the creator produced false visions of the divine in worldly (and therefore ephemeral) images. Still others have seen the verse as a plank balanced on the word 'shikaar' (hunt) and sought to draw a portrait of a hunter stalking prey with passion and seeking water at an oasis (vadi) and finding nothing but dust, thereby symbolizing the futility of existence.

The ambiguity of the sher provides us with multiple meanings, conveyed through multiple metaphors, all in two Sufi-like lines. The aaina/ghubaar binary evokes the image of a mirage that shimmers from a distance, only to let down the expectant wayfarer up close, and recalls the Sufi contention that the world of materiality is but a deception and that those who lust after it are doomed to eventual disappointment. Thus, by the deployment of Sufi images, Ghalib was able to layer his verses with a multiplicity of meanings.

Ghalib's devotion to Sufism separated him from his Delhi contemporaries such as Zauq and Momin, who began to take on a more austere and literalist approach to Islamic dogma in their later years. After the death of the great Mughal king Akbar, clergymen who promoted a literalist version of Islam became prominent in the Mughal court. The more extremist amongst them were associated with the deaths of Sufi saints such as Nurullah Shustari in Jahangir's reign and Sarmad Kashani in Aurangzeb's. Ghalib's multireligious and multicultural experiences kept him away from the astringent Ahl-e Hadith positions and increasingly brought him into the Sufi fold. Moreover, he fancied himself a disciple of the seventeenth-century scholar Abdul Qadir Bedil, who was not only an exponent of an indigenous Persian style of poetry (which Ghalib admired) but was also a Sufi saint and espoused Sufi metaphysics in his writings.

The intersection of language, poetry and spiritual belief pushed Ghalib further towards Sufism.

The ‘love poetry’ of Ghalib that is constantly quoted in secular contexts also abounds in the same Sufi metaphors. For Ghalib, and indeed for all Sufis, the protocols of love extend in a seamless continuum from inter-human attraction to the gnostic love of the divine. There is wonderment (hairat), desire (*shauq*, tamanna), the occasional madness (junoon), the tearing of the shirt collar (*chaak garebaani*), and eventually, self-destruction (fana). Consider the following lines:

Wai deewaanagi-e shauq ke har dum mujh ko
Aap jaana udhar aur aap hi hairaaN hona

Alas, my intense desire has left me crazed
Time and again I go there, and leave amazed

In contrast to the disappointment experienced by the poet in the previous verse, Ghalib here is attracted to and eventually amazed by the new manifestations (tajalliyaat) of the loved object. The true form of the beloved/divine only reveals itself up close, increasing both delight and surprises and emphasizing the importance of ‘feeling/love’ at the expense of ‘understanding/reason’.

Sufi motifs of sacrifice run through Ghalib’s work. One of his more famous couplets goes:

Aashiqui sabr-talab aur tamanna betaab
Dil ka kya rang karooN khoon-e jigar hone tak

Love counsels patience while passion betrays its anxiety
How should I colour my heart, while these dual passions rage?

The duality between aashiqui (true love) and tamanna (perhaps a more superficial desire) here evokes opposite emotions that produce tumult and confusion in the heart, only resolvable by its transformation into blood. The theme of blood (and the colour of blood) runs through Ghalib’s poetry. Sometimes he feels it necessary to provide an accounting to the object of

his devotion for the tears of blood he shed, for after all, the tears were from his heart, which belonged to the beloved. Sometimes the flowing blood shows the strength of the heart, for had it been stone, sparks would have flown. Sometimes, he asks that true blood does not wish merely to course through veins, but flow from the eyes. *Jab aankh hi se na tapka to phir lahu kya hai?* What is that blood that does not flow from the eyes?

In a similar vein, Ghalib wrote several verses extolling the sacrifice of Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, whose brave act of martyrdom symbolized to him the finest of human actions. Describing Husain, he wrote, *salaam usey ke agar baadshaah kaheN us ko; to phir kaheN ke kuch us se siwa kaheN us ko.* Praise be to him, that if one called him an emperor, then one would desire to call him something greater than that.

The themes of sacrifice and blood and tears run through Ghalib's verse with a Sufi rhythm. Self-abnegation, self-abasement and self-sacrifice all work in the service of the beloved, sometimes unattainable, occasionally heartless, but always a reason to live or die.

Devotion to Ali

Ghalib was a fierce devotee of Imam Ali, the cousin of Prophet Mohammad, the spiritual leader of the Shias and the fountainhead of most Sufi orders. In declaring this devotion stridently, Ghalib was staking out a partisan position in a religious divide that was deepening across the subcontinent. On the one hand, Sunni society in India, which had assumed a Sufi character over time, was being courted by the desiccated literalism of the Wahabis. On the other, the Shias were asserting themselves as a righteous religious sect that had been dispossessed and persecuted by intolerant rulers, and were reimagining their faith as a popular form of Islam, undergirded by poetry and performance that resonated across class divides. The obduracy of the Wahabis and the assertiveness of the Shias would lead to violent riots and bloodletting in the early twentieth century, but during Ghalib's time, the Sufi position kept the peace between

religions and denominations, providing a safe space where Sunnis and Shias, Hindus and Muslims, could enact shared traditions. And Ali, the patron saint of most Sufi orders, lay at the heart of Sufi metaphysics.

In his letters, Ghalib constantly wrote of his devotion to Ali. For example, in one to his friend Yousuf Mirza dated 28 November 1859, he said: 'For whatever sorrow or joy, whatever calumny or whatever honour is fated for me, I will wait, and then, repeating Ali's name, I shall depart for the land of oblivion—my body to the realm of Rampur, and my soul to the realm of light. *Ya Ali, Ya Ali, Ya Ali*.' In another letter, he swore: '*Ali ka banda hooN, us ki qasam jhoot nahiN khaata*' (I am the retainer of my Lord Ali and do not swear by his name in vain). For Ghalib, it was a sign of his steadfastness that he would never make a promise in the name of Imam Ali and then break it. According to him, the greatest journey that a person could make was a trip to Najaf to see Imam Ali's mausoleum. In his words, *khaak-e sehra-e Najaf jauhar-e sair-e urafa*, the sands of the desert of Najaf are the jewelled destinations for the journeys of the wise.

Ghalib was influenced enormously by Shia spiritualism, but had to be careful about this. The Mughal court had come under the influence of Salafis over time, and had exhibited anti-Shia and anti-Sufi attitudes since the time of Jahangir. Reflecting this need to be mindful of royal sentiment, Ghalib never overtly came out as a Shia or a Sunni and stayed within the ambiguities of pan-Islamic identity. But his need to engage in dissimulation was a lot less than it might have been in another era; the days when the emperor could order executions were gone, and Ghalib had the indirect support of Shia kings and nobles from adjoining areas (Rampur and Awadh in particular), which allowed him to express his deep devotion to Ali in his poetry. In a Farsi poem, he wrote:

> *Ghalib-e-naamawaram naam-o-nishaanam ma-purs*
> *Hum Asadullaaham-o hum Asadullaahiyam*
>
> I am the famous Ghalib; of my provenance ask no more
> But that I'm Asadullah, slave of the Asadullah[2] of yore

Ghalib's Urdu poems were often infused with praise for Ali, some even attributing divine powers to him. In his words, *hum ibaadat ko tera naqsh-e qadam, mohrey namaaz*, we can prostrate to god in the indentation of your footprints. He often refers to Ali by flowery appellations such as *saaqi-e Kausar* (the cupbearer of the spring of heaven). In one of his famous verses, he wrote:

Ghalib nadeem-e dost se aati hai bu-e dost
Mashghool-e haq hooN bandagi-e bu-turaab meiN

Ghalib, the friend of the lord his fragrance does emit
Steeped am I in virtue, I am Ali's servant, I admit

The idea here is that Ali is god's friend and thus exudes divine fragrance. The poem makes a reference to one of Ali's appellations, 'bu-turaab' (father of the earth). This nickname extols Ali's spirituality, and Ghalib makes use of it in other verses, sometimes through the complex associations that make him notoriously difficult to understand, but reward those who try. Consider these four lines from one of his ghazals that underscore both his great devotion to Imam Ali and the complexity of his poetry:

Jalva pardaaz ho naqsh-e qadam uska jis ja
Vo kaf-e khaak hai naamoos-e do aalam ki ameeN
Nisbat-e naam se uske hai ye rutba ke rahe
Abadan pusht-e falak kham shuda-e naaz-e zameeN

Behold the one, the dust under whose footprints
Is the benefactor of this world and the next,
And the dignity of association with whose name
Forever makes the sky bow down before the earth

The first two lines contend that 'the dust under *his* footprints is the saviour of the honour of this world and the next'. Whose footprints is Ghalib referring to? That is revealed in the next two lines. Poets often attribute a far higher status to the lofty sky (falak) as compared to the lowly earth (zameen). But because of association with *his* name, the stature of the

earth has gone up so much that the sky itself forever (abadan) bends over in obeisance (pusht-e falak kham*)* to the earth. Whose name are we referring to? Ali's of course, the bu-turaab, or the father of the earth.

Mocking Religious Practice

Ghalib's poetry exhibits deep spirituality on the one hand and utter contempt for religious orthodoxy on the other. Such ambivalence was not uncommon, especially amongst poets of that era. Mir, Dard, Zauq and others had also expressed similar sentiments. In fact, one could argue that Mir had rescued Urdu poetry from its religiosity and turned it into an instrument of impudent and insolent apostasy.

Like Mir before him, Ghalib was trenchant in his criticism of the clergy, who were depicted in his poetry as hypocrites who ceaselessly advocated for an empty, ritual-based worship. The *waaiz* (pure one) came in for a lot of ridicule; to be in his bad books was a badge of honour for Ghalib (*Ghalib, bura na maan jo waaiz bura kahe*, Ghalib, feel not bad should the pure one criticize you). Cutting asides about the nature of afterlife, especially heaven, abounded in his verse. When the shaikh extols the garden of paradise, Ghalib sees nothing but a wilted bunch of flowers on the forgotten shelf (*taakh-e nisyaaN*). Occasionally, the tyranny of the waaiz is expressed by juxtaposing him with an executioner, *jallaad se darte haiN na waaiz se jhagadte*, we neither fear the executioner nor argue with the pure one. One of Ghalib's best-known couplets goes:

> *KahaaN maikhaane ka darwaaza Ghalib aur kahaaN waaiz*
> *Par itna jaante hain, kal vo jaata tha ke hum nikle*
>
> Where the tavern door, and where the preacher, Ghalib?
> But all I know is this; he was entering as I left

It is not just the holy man who is subjected to this sarcasm; god isn't spared either. For instance, Muslims believe that two recording angels sit on their shoulders making a list of good and bad deeds that will be used on the Day of Judgment to determine whether they are to be heaven-bound or

consigned to hell. Ghalib finds the arrangement to be unfair. What if the angels err in their calculation, or wilfully misrepresent the deeds of humans?

Pakde jaate haiN farishtoN ke likhe par na-haq
Aadmi koi hamaara dam-e tahreer bhi thha

We are needlessly entrapped by the angels' transcription
Was there an agent of ours at the time of writing?

Ghalib's defiance is often tempered by his faith, such as in the two contiguous ash'aar from a ghazal:

Kya vo Namrud ki khudaai thi?
Bandagi meiN mera bhala na hua

Jaan di, di hui usi ki thi
Haq to ye hai ke haq ada na hua

Was it the divinity of the pretender Nimrod?
Even my obeisance was not beneficent

I gave up my life, for it was His gift
The truth is that even this was insufficient

The first two lines apparently mock god, who in his inability to minister to the worshipper proves to be a pretender (Nimrod was the arrogant foil to Abraham's piety and plays the role of the paradigmatic false god in Urdu poetry). But in the very next verse, Ghalib affects an abject supplication, implying that even the ultimate sacrifice is insufficient to recompense god for the act of creation. Of course, the subject of both verses remains ambiguous (and can stand in for the earthly beloved), but reading it as a reference to god shows us Ghalib's relationship with god, one that was simultaneously devotional and combative.

Ghalib believed in spiritual gnosis but not in rituals. He reserved special disdain for the fast and was pointedly proud of the fact that he neither fasted nor prayed. His biographer Altaf Hussain Hali narrates several stories of how Ghalib not only ate during the day in the month of Ramadan

but also quipped about why he was doing so. ‘I am fasting, of course. It is just that I occasionally pamper my fast, with a little food here and a little water there.’ The memory of recent famines was in his mind, and he had seen enough hunger to find the ritual mystifying and annoying. ‘Those people who have enough means to prepare for the evening meal must certainly fast. But those who have no food to eat, perhaps that person should eat the fast instead!’

Ghalib’s aversion to ritual didn’t stem from disbelief in god. On the contrary, he seemed to be seeking a divine connection beyond a mere ritualized adherence to faith. Ghalib imagined a more mystical form of worship for himself, where he would be but a mute spectator in the magical tableau of divine desire (*tamaashaai-e nairang-e tamanna*), where the meaning of faith required a disavowal of any desire to seek meaning. In his words:

> *Hai pare sarhad-e idraak se apna masjood*
> *Qibla ko ahl-e nazar qibla-numa kehte haiN*
>
> The object of my prayer is beyond the boundary of perception
> For the cognoscenti, the Kaaba is nothing more than a compass

Perhaps unfairly, Ghalib derided ritual-bound believers for following religion unthinkingly and for believing that the structure of the Kaaba (‘qibla’ in his words but standing in for anything that was within the boundaries of human perception) was the object of prayer. For him, true worship consisted of destroying the self in the service of the divine. He challenged the religious to consign their ego to annihilation, for ‘the brilliance of the piece of hay is seen when it burns in the furnace’ (*farogh-e taali-e khashaak hai mauqud gulkhaaN par*). It is strange to hear the challenge to ‘destroy the self’ from someone who spent much of his life seeking material comfort, but these charming contradictions were an essential element of Ghalib’s personality.

Ultimately, the religious churning of Ghalib’s time both transformed him and ended up reflected in his writings. The equanimous coexistence of religions, however, did not last the test of time and history. In the days

after 1857, religious positions began to harden so much that even ancient history was reinterpreted as an era of great inter-religious strife. The British colonists must shoulder much of the blame for this. Since they viewed Muslims as the primary instigators of the 1857 rebellion, they treated them with special cruelty, relative to the Hindus of Delhi. The selective repression began to fracture the communities, and the British, learning from past experiences, decided to exploit these schisms to their advantage. The communal fracturing intensified over time. In hindsight, Ghalib appears prescient when he had declared: *vafaadaari meiN shaikh-o barahman ki aazmaaish hai*, in the matter of loyalty, the shaikh and the barahman must face the test. Indeed, the shaikh and the barahman were tested in the crucible of colonial rule, and neither came out looking all that great. Within a century of Ghalib's death, the subcontinent was divided, orgies of violence ensued, and the fabric of amity that had been woven over a period defined by mutual admiration and friendly coexistence between religious communities became increasingly frayed.

3

The Ghalib Paradox

One day, some white men entered Ghalib's house by force. The king's soldiers tried to stop them, but they would not be denied. Mirza narrates in his 'Dastambu' that the British soldiers took him and a few companions into custody and presented him before a British colonel. The colonel asked him, 'Are you Muslim?' Mirza replied, 'Half.' 'What does that mean?' asked the colonel. Mirza replied, 'I drink wine but do not eat pork.'

This anecdote, reported by Altaf Husain Hali in his *Yaadgaar-e Ghalib*, reveals how Ghalib often got by on his wits and charm in an era where a wrong word could lead to terrible consequences. Here, he saved his skin by his levity, declaring himself to be 'a half-Muslim'. In reality he was a half-everything, with a few implied romantic dalliances on one side and a strong puritanical bent on the other, sharply critical of many a peer but notoriously thin-skinned when criticized, affecting a couldn't-care-less attitude to the way his work was received but keeping a sharp eye out for praise, mocking the foibles of the powerful while also displaying a predilection for sycophancy.

These may appear to be character flaws but were in fact born of the imperative to survive in a constantly shifting sociopolitical terrain. It must be remembered that Ghalib occupied a subaltern position in the socio-economic pecking order of his day, possessing neither wealth nor powerful backing. Much of his persona therefore was constructed to avoid being attacked or judged on the basis of his financial and structural vulnerabilities or his relative lack of contacts amongst the powerful. He often enacted his resistance to power slyly, using the 'weapons of the

weak’ and taking positions that he could withdraw from should they get him into trouble.

Ghalib’s Poor Choices

Ghalib’s self-presentation was of one who lived a life of affluence and leisure, where he was respected as a thinker and honoured by the powerful. In reality, his poetic prowess was relatively unacknowledged in his own time, and his existence was marked by deep and constant financial insecurity exacerbated by the fact that he all too often backed the wrong horse in the context of a constantly shifting field of power. Where the Mughals were concerned, Zauq outsmarted him by hitching his wagon to Bahadur Shah Zafar, while Ghalib was left backing the wrong prince. On the British end, his cousins outwitted him in the matter of his inheritance with a better set of contacts. It could be argued that even when it came to language, Ghalib made poor choices, electing to write in Farsi at the exact time that Urdu poetry was achieving legitimacy, and losing a lot of time writing Persian poetry in what was regarded as a derivative style. Seen against this backdrop, Ghalib’s frequent resort to his sharp wit as well as his many foibles and personality quirks (chronicled both by his peers and in the many letters he wrote) paint a picture of an extremely intelligent and complex man struggling to maintain his dignity in a world that was rapidly changing in ways that were not easy to grasp.

Ghalib’s often contradictory attitudes towards religion, which we encountered earlier, provide one lens into his complex personality. His attitude towards wine, and towards those in power, both feudal and colonial, provide others.

Ghalib and Wine

Prohibition against the consumption of alcohol is considered an important artefact of Islamic faith. However, Ghalib was not only an inveterate drinker but was also quite vocal about his consumption, to the point of

‘over-sharing’. He did so while keeping the company of Muslims, writing verses dripping in religious piety and participating in the socio-religious activities of his milieu. Perhaps the consumption of alcohol was not as big a social taboo amongst Muslims of nineteenth-century Delhi as one might imagine. Certainly, Ghalib, who was not averse to self-censorship when it came to politically sensitive issues, felt free to out himself time and again as a connoisseur and consumer of alcohol.

He measured his economic situation by the quality of wine he drank and reserved his highest affection for those of his friends that brought him wine as a gift. While he preferred wine, he also made do with rum or even country spirits when his budget contracted. At the same time, he declared that he was a *muvahhid* (that is, he evinced faith in the oneness of god—one of the main tenets of Islam) and had an abiding love for the Prophet and his family. He often needled the clerics about their pronouncements against the consumption of alcohol through verses calculated to shock them and other ‘pious’ Muslims. For example, the matla of one of his ghazals goes:

> *Masjid ke zer-e saaya kharaabaat chaahiye*
> *BhauN-paas aankh qibla-e haajaat chaahiye*
>
> There should exist a tavern under a mosque’s shade
> Just as below the eyebrow, the praying eye’s arrayed

Here, the curve of an eyebrow is seen as a mehraab, the dome under which prayer is performed. Just as the eyebrow shelters the eye, so too should the mosque shelter the tavern. Ghalib is equating the tavern to the eye; to him it is the fount of creativity and the object of supplication (qibla-e haajaat).

On other occasions, he mocked his own attempts at temperance. For example, he claimed that he had given up wine and only occasionally indulged in it, ‘when there is a cloud in the sky at day, or a moon at night’ (*peeta hooN roz-e abr-o shab-e maahtaab meiN).* At other times, he imagined himself prohibited from drinking, presumably by ill-health or impending death, but declared he would like to lie with a wine flask and glass in his sight, for ‘my hands do not have strength, but my eyes still

work’. *Go haath ko jumbish nahiN aankhoN meiN to dum hai; Rahne do abhi saaghar-o meena mere aage.*

Wine was a source of unmitigated pleasure for Ghalib. He felt that it opened the doors of perception, and more importantly, made life worth living. In his words:

> *JaaN-fiza hai baada jis ke haath meiN jaam aa gaya*
> *Sab lakeereN haath ki goya rag-e jaaN ho gaeeN*
>
> Wine is life-giving, and the hand that a cup contains
> As if every line of their hand turned to jugular veins

Ghalib of course knew his way around Islamic lore and used his religious knowledge to defend his drinking, or at least complicate its proscription. He repeatedly reminded anyone who would listen that the Quran stated that the highest quality wine would be offered to the faithful on the Day of Judgment, and that Imam Ali was known as the Saaqi-e Kausar (the cup-bearer of the pool of paradise). In fact, he specifically invoked Ali as and when he enjoined his contemporaries to drink:

> *Kal ke liye kar aaj na khissat sharaab meiN*
> *Ye soo-e zan hai Saaqi-e Kausar ke baab meiN*
>
> Do not save for the morrow, be not niggardly with wine
> Lest the cupbearer of Kausar deem you out of line

Wine featured prominently in his letters to his friends. He credited his poetic prowess to inebriation (alongside other bad habits). Once, the story goes, when he heard people extolling the poetry of the pious Imam Bakhsh Sahbai (1803–57), his contemporary, Ghalib retorted, ‘How can Sahbai be called a poet? He has not tasted wine, nor gambled, nor been beaten with slippers by a lover, nor has he been imprisoned.’ Needless to say, Ghalib had experienced all of the above. In 1837, a British wine merchant sued him for a series of unpaid chits. Legend has it that the presiding judge, Mufti Sadruddin Azurda, who was a fan, ruled against Ghalib but paid the merchant with his own money, sending Ghalib on his way. Another time,

he was found guilty on a charge of gambling and landed in jail. History is thankfully silent when it comes to the matter of his being beaten with slippers by a lover!

Ghalib and Feudal Power

Chaltaa hoon thodi door har ek tez-rau ke saath
Pehchaanta nahin hoon abhi raahbar ko maiN

I do not mind walking awhile with every swift traveller
But I do not yet recognize in any of them my leader

Ghalib spent most of his life in abject poverty, dependent on a variety of benefactors for his economic survival, from Bahadur Shah Zafar to the nawabs of Rampur or Awadh, and any number of British bureaucrats. Often, he was required to write panegyrics in their honour as part of the payback—a service that he performed perfunctorily, making fun of them behind their backs when he deemed it safe to do so. This may appear to be hypocritical, but his dependence on the largesse of the powerful was the source of much bitterness for him, and so his self-respect and perhaps even his sanity required being able to engage in such everyday acts of resistance. He can hardly be faulted for writing verses of praise that were less than enthusiastic, such as these lines composed in honour of the nawab of Farrukhabad:

Diya hai khalq ko bhi ta usey nazar na lage
Bana hai aish Tajammul Husain KhaN ke liye
ZabaaN pe baar-e ilaahi ye kis ka naam aaya
Ke meri nutq ne bosey meri zabaaN ke liye

God has also given to others, lest they be jealous
Of Tajammul Khan for whom all wealth was created
Whose name, oh my great lord, has passed my lips today!
For my words kissed my tongue when it was stated!

But his praise rarely went beyond the odes; rather, Ghalib was notorious for lampooning his patrons on the side. For instance, he found mirth in the

realization that some of the benefactors he had written odes for had died shortly thereafter, slyly taking credit for their passing: ‘Anyone feted by me does not survive, it appears. Naseeruddin Haider and Amjad Ali Shah passed away after one qaseeda each. Wajid Ali Shah survived three qaseedas but couldn’t take it any longer. If I compose ten or twenty qaseedas for someone, they will depart even from the afterlife!’

For all his efforts at obsequiousness, he was capable of turning on these benefactors with satire when he felt disrespected. The story goes that Zafar would pay his poets every six months, adding to Ghalib’s already strained economic circumstances. He penned an appeal for a monthly salary to the king in the form of a thirty-verse-long poem detailing his hardship but dripping with stinging satire. A glance at just four of the verses is enough to get a sense of his sly repartee:

Bas ke leta hooN har maheeney qarz
Aur rehti hai sood ki takraar
Meri tankhwaah meiN tihaai ka
Ho gaya hai shareek sahookar
Meri tankhwaah keejay maah-ba-maah
To na ho mujh ko zindagi dushwaar
Tum salaamat raho hazaar baras
Har baras ke hoN din pachaas hazaar

I take out loans every month
And am burdened with interest
Of my salary I keep but two-thirds
The moneylender claims the rest
Pay my salary monthly, please
Lest life become a tougher test
Live a thousand elongated years
May you with long life be blest!

Over time, the last two lines quoted above have attained the status of a popular benediction, having lost the contextual sense of the sarcasm embedded in the original.

Ghalib and Colonial Power

Ghalib's relationship with the feudal nobility, while fraught, was nevertheless leavened by humour and banter. This was less the case where his interactions with the British were concerned, who had neither an understanding of cultural nuance nor any interest in it. A famous anecdote about Ghalib recorded by Muhammad Husain Azad in *Aab-e Hayaat* relates to his potential appointment as a professor of Persian at Delhi College. This was a position that came with a status and salary that Ghalib was in desperate need of. However, when he arrived for the job interview he refused to enter the premises until the secretary of the college, one Mr Thomason, came out to welcome him personally. The obdurate Thomason refused, invoking bureaucratic clauses. Rather than retract his demand for the sake of the desperately needed position and suffer a consequent loss of face, Ghalib preferred to leave. He gave poetic voice to his feelings thus:

> *Bandagi meiN bhi vo aazaada o khud-beeN haiN ke ham*
> *Ulte phir aaye dar-e Kaaba agar va na hua*
>
> In submission I seek respect, despite my devotion
> I'll return even from god's house if its doors don't open

Thomason's cool hauteur reflected the general British attitude towards Ghalib. The new masters lacked cultural literacy, and exhibited little interest in learning how relations of patronage worked in the local context, and Ghalib's economic fortunes ended up falling through the cracks between feudal and colonial India.

After 1857

After the revolt of 1857, Delhi saw savage reprisals by the British, often directed not just against erstwhile rebels, but against anyone who they felt had aided the revolt in any way. There was terror in the streets of the capital for months, before it eventually limped back to normalcy.

The British attitude towards a Muslim poet who had been loyal to Zafar would understandably terrify someone like Ghalib, and it would not be hyperbolic to say that he began to fear for his life. Amongst those

executed by the British in the wake of the ‘mutiny’ had been some of his close poet contemporaries; the same Sahbai with whom Ghalib used to trade jibes was shot dead during the massacre of Kucha Chelan in September 1857. Meanwhile, his list of dependants had grown—he was now the head of a large extended family, which included the children of his dead nephew, and consequently had to tread carefully given the shifting ground of politics.

Like many others, Ghalib lost a lot and was greatly inconvenienced during the revolt. His brother Yousuf died for want of medical attention during those days, and he and Umrao were reduced to a state of near-starvation. Most distressing to him, a lot of his poetry was lost in the conflagration. In a letter to his friend he wrote: ‘I never kept my poems with me. Nawab Ziyauddin Khan and Nawab Husain Mirza had collected them. They wrote down all that I had composed. Now both their houses have been sacked. Libraries worth thousands of rupees have been razed. How I yearn to see my own poetry! A few days ago a faqir, who has a beautiful voice and is a fine singer, found a ghazal of mine and got it written down. When the beggar showed me that piece of paper, believe me, I felt like weeping!’

Ghalib had no option but to return to the public arena. His meagre earnings depended on his ability to be seen as a public figure, and perhaps gain a tutoring appointment here, a mushaira invitation there. He also needed to get the measure of the new administration to figure out how his pension could be restored and avoid future harassment should he be marked as a supporter of the rebels.

He initially tried his hand at what he knew best, writing a Persian ode in praise of Queen Victoria, a poem he had actually composed some time ago, but tried to re-send. As a poem, it was a magnificent effort and elevated the monarch to a status higher than Alexander and the mythical Persian king Fereydun, regarded a paragon of justice and generosity in Farsi literature. Unfortunately, not much came of it. The British had neither the inclination, nor perhaps the ability, to appropriately

acknowledge or reward that offering. It went into the black hole of British bureaucracy.

Dastambu

His poetic efforts having failed, Ghalib tried the prose route and sought to record an account of the mutiny and its aftermath, composed first as a diary in Farsi and later published as a book titled *Dastambu* (A Fistful of Flowers). The book reflects how he adjusted to his changed circumstances once the city was stripped even of the pretence of Mughal rule.

The amount of self-restraint he must have exercised when writing that tract is evident in the prose and reflects Ghalib's literal fear for his life. This was not paranoia—he had observed carnage at an unprecedented scale and knew how costly the use of the wrong words could prove to be. And yet he could not help but be critical, even if he tried to do so in muted and highly circumscribed ways.

Ghalib began *Dastambu*, following established convention, with an elaborate ode in praise of god. He moved on to recounting stories of earlier conquerors in other lands, who followed their conquests with violence against the populace. He then threw in a few words critical of the rebellious soldiers of Meerut ('faithless to their salt') who overran Delhi, and the guards of the Delhi cantonment who, far from fighting them, had instead welcomed them. He presented himself as one of many inconvenienced by this action, and in overwrought prose, expressed pity for those English folk, men, women and children, who had lost their lives as a consequence. He decried the loss of order, the cessation of tax payments, the freeing of all prisoners and the looting that ensued in the days during which the rebels controlled the city, and their disrespectful treatment of the emperor.

Ghalib then segued into stories of his own life, presenting himself as a victim of circumstances, subjected to untold suffering by the way in which normal life in his beloved city had ground to a complete halt. 'Every door in the city has closed. There is neither shopkeeper nor customer, there is

no seller of wheat from whom to buy flour, no washerman to wash dirty clothes, no barber to cut hair or sweeper to clean floors. Even getting water is impossible.'

He then proceeded to describe the manner in which the British took back the city after pitched battles. It is here that he ventured some cautious critique of British conduct: 'There is a prison outside the city and one inside. In both places, so many people have been crowded together that it seems as if they must have fused together and crawled into each other's skins. The angel of death alone knows how many people have been hanged by the neck in these two prisons.'

In describing his own inconveniences, Ghalib sought to mirror the sad state of Delhi following the mutiny, where lawlessness was its own reason and terror its own logic. But a close reading of *Dastambu* and Ghalib's equivocal prose not only reminds us of the precarious state of the city after the rebellion was quelled, but also provides insight into the psyche of a man who, when confronted with power, responded with ambivalence. A cursory reading of *Dastambu* might understand it as a critique of the rebellion, but if approached from the point of view of a beleaguered resident of Delhi in 1858, *Dastambu* reveals itself to be an accounting of oppression, an expression of anger masked by sadness and despair—in effect, an act of resistance. This ambiguity is also an integral part of the 'Ghalib paradox'.

4

Ghalib and His Critics

Maala japne laga hai buddhhu ghar ghar
Kalma padhne laga hai mithhoo ghar ghar
Tota bhi hai haafiz-e kalaam-e Ghalib
Mirza ka bolta hai ullu ghar ghar

The idiot chants a repetitive spell in every home
And piously does the parrot yell in every home
Every copycat has now memorized Ghalib's poems
The owl hoots Mirza's verse as well in every home

Yagana Changezi (1884–1956), who wrote the above verse on the flyleaf of his contrarian tract *Ghalib Shikan* (Conqueror of Ghalib), gave voice to generations of poets who felt that Ghalib had been given undue importance by critics and the public and had been equated with all that was good in Urdu poetry in a manner unfair to his predecessors, contemporaries and successors. In Changezi's ringing words, 'the blind faith of Ghalibians has usurped the efforts of all past and current poets and granted all their skills to Ghalib, presenting him as the sole representative of Urdu.' For Changezi, Ghalib was an unoriginal plagiarist, an inveterate *daad-sukhan*, one who shamelessly craved approbation, while his fans were sycophants unacquainted with the rich poetic history of Urdu.

Later Critics

Changezi's analysis of Ghalib is especially sour, but the reality is that Ghalib always had his share of detractors, in his time and later. From Hali to Azad and beyond, critiques of Ghalib after his death abound, but most

of them seem to have been levelled by those seeking to burnish their own reputation at his expense. For instance, the poet Jaun Elia (1931–2002) is reported to have declared that, *'MiaN Ghalib to pachchees sheroN ka shaayar tha'* (Ghalib was a poet of twenty-five verses), implying that the rest of his work was derivative. Of course, Elia quickly segued from a critique of Ghalib to self-promotion, declaring that there were essentially two great poets in Urdu, Mir Taqi Mir and Elia himself![1]

Other self-aggrandizing critiques of Ghalib have occurred across time and across languages. To discuss one example of early English writing on Ghalib from India, we can go back to 1928, when Professor Syed Abdul Latif wrote a sharply worded critique of Ghalib's work titled *Ghalib: A Critical Appreciation of His Life and Urdu Poetry.* The word 'appreciation' in the title of that book truly strikes one as ironic, for it was a merciless takedown of the bard, ending its analysis with the following words: 'This is the story of our poet. He lived a distracted life under the shadow of a distracted outlook, and left us poetry out of harmony with itself. He cannot be numbered among the great.' Others, such as the critic Muhammad Sadiq, have damned him with faint praise.

Ghalib's Contemporaries

However, the more interesting (and entertaining) critiques of Ghalib came from his contemporaries. Given his abrasive personality and his penchant for making merciless fun of his peers, it is quite understandable that Ghalib had his share of adversaries and detractors, many of whom got back at him by making mischievous jokes about his work. The general opinion was that Ghalib's poems were deliberately obtuse and opaque, and Ghalib himself was needlessly pompous and could use a good takedown. One of his contemporaries, Agha Jaan Aish, tried his hand at one such. In a mushaira, just before Ghalib was set to take the stage, he is reported to have declaimed:

> *Agar apna kaha khud aap hi samjhe to kya samjhe*
> *Maza kehne ka jab hai ik kahe aur doosra samjhe*

Kalaam-e Meer samjhe aur zabaan-e-Meerza samjhe
Magar in ka kaha ya aap samjhe ya Khuda samjhe!

Of what use is speaking if only the speaker understands?
Speaking is fun when one speaks and another understands
The poetry of Meer and the language of Meerza[2] we understand
But of what he says, only he or the Almighty understand

Ghalib's response to these critiques alternated between exasperation and good humour. Some of his simpler ghazals may well have been written in response to such critique. But as a poet, he always regarded himself as a purveyor of the 'meaningless verses', or perhaps 'verses beyond meaning', the *abyaat-e be-ma'ani*. Under his skilful hand, language danced to the most subliminal of rhythms, layering meaning upon meaning, changing its connotation depending on which word was emphasized and at which point one paused during its recitation. Indeed, he was the nightingale of a garden of *rekhti* that was still under construction.

The Sehra Controversy

Ghalib's temperament got him into a lot of trouble many a time. One such occasion stands out. In 1851, the wedding of Mirza Jawan Bakht, the youngest son of Bahadur Shah Zafar, was solemnized. The king's wife, Nawab Zinat Mahal, harboured a desire that her son would ascend to the Mughal throne and prevailed upon the relatively straitened monarch to conduct one of the most lavish weddings in history. Obligatory to the occasion, of course, was a *sehra*, a traditional paean to the groom. Zauq was indisposed and Ghalib was asked to compose it. He did his bit but could not resist incorporating digs at Zauq and the king, hidden like Easter eggs throughout the poem, and ended with a florid maqta[3] that was essentially in praise of . . . Ghalib! He wrote thus:

Hum suqan-fahm hai Ghalib ke tarafdaar nahiN
DekheN likh de koi is sehre se behtar sehra

We are the cognoscenti, Ghalib-partisans we are not

We challenge anyone to better this poetic thought

Word did get around to the monarch, perhaps amplified by Zauq, that Ghalib had belittled the occasion with this act of thoughtless grandstanding. In an earlier era, a head could have rolled, and even in this age of attenuated monarchy, the king's ire could have led to major financial consequences. Sensing potential opportunities slip away, Ghalib saved himself by—what else—writing a poem of explanatory apology. In his poem, he kowtowed to the king, appeased Zauq and engaged in self-abnegation. Or did he? Be the judge, for the poem deserves to be read in its entirety:

MAAFINAAMA

Manzoor hai guzaarish-e ahwaal-e waaqai
Apna bayaan husn-e-tabiyat nahiN mujhe

Sau pusht se hai pesha-e-aaba sipah-giri
Kuch shaayari zariyya-e-izzat nahiN mujhe

Azad rau hooN aur mera maslak hai sulh-e kul
Hargiz kabhi kisi se adaawat nahiN mujhe

Kya kam hai ye sharaf ke Zafar ka ghulaam hooN
Maana ke jaah-o mansab-o sarwat nahiN mujhe

Ustaad-e-shah se ho mujhe pur-khaash ka khayaal
Yeh taab yeh majaal yeh taaqat nahiN mujhe

Jaam-e-jahaaN numa hai shahanshaah ka zameer
Saugandh aur gawaah ki haajat nahiN mujhe

Sehra likha gaya zarah-e imtesaal-e amr
Dekha ke chaar-e ghair-ita'at nahiN mujhe

Maqte mein aa padi hai sukhan gustaraana baat
Maqsood is se qat-e muhabbat nahiN mujhe

Ru-e-sukhan kisi ki taraf ho to ru siyaah
Sauda nahiN junooN nahiN vehshat nahiN mujhe

Saadiq hooN apne qaul meiN Ghalib, khuda gawaah
Kehta hooN sach ke jhoot ki aadat nahiN mujhe

APOLOGY

It is my desire that we report just the facts
I am not given to self-praise, I am a man of tact

My forefathers have been soldiers for many a generation
Poetry has never been for me a source of acclamation

I am a free spirit and conciliatory is my mien
My verses are not malicious, and they do not demean

It is enough privilege for me that I serve Zafar
Though unrecognized, unpaid and unrewarded, I suffer

I dare not take potshots at the teacher of his Highness[4]
I lack such temerity, such arrogance, such slyness

To look beyond my liege's saintly conscience I am loath
For my exoneration I need not swear another oath

The sehra was written in compliance with royal order
Obedience demanded I become the wedding's recorder

Needlessly controversial became my poem's final verse
It threatens friendships now, makes misunderstandings worse

If I harbour motives ulterior, may my face go black!
A merchant's plan, a madman's scheme, a crazy plot, I lack

As god is my witness, Ghalib my word is always true
I prefer honesty in speech and hate lying, I do!

The poem was indeed supplicatory in its attitude but contained a few zingers below the surface. For example, Ghalib implies that the sehra was written under duress. The reference to a black face may have contained an attack at the dark-complexioned Zauq. The verse mentioning the king also notes that Ghalib had not been paid. But Ghalib was aware that people in power always responded favourably to flattery, and in this case too, he escaped without any major consequence.

Taunts and Counter-taunts

When he did take on a fellow poet, it appears he tended to stretch the boundaries of accepted propriety, provoking his opponents incessantly. Zauq in particular was subjected to repeated and pointed jabs. It must have tired the old poet laureate to see Ghalib needle him continuously, be it in a poem written to mark the wedding of the king's son, an aside to friends, or a verbal snub as he walked past.

Not gifted with the art of invective, Zauq seethed privately, but many others gave as good as they got. A humorous anecdote that is often repeated involves a contemporary who slyly asked Ghalib in a public forum to explain one of his verses, which apparently went:

> *Pehle to raughan-e gul bhains ke ande se nikaal*
> *Phir dawa jitni ho kul bhains ke ande se nikaal*
>
> First, extract rose essence from the egg of a buffalo
> Then distil all medicine from the egg of a buffalo

When a bemused Ghalib declared that the sher was utter nonsense, his interlocutor claimed, 'But I read that in your divaan,' perhaps to many a snigger.

Ghalib, it could be argued, brought this upon himself. His cantankerous personality often begged such comeuppance. But many a time, he saved himself by sheer presence of mind. In another anecdote made famous by repetition, it is said that he once spotted Zauq shuffling past his house and taunted him thus: *Hua hai shah ka musaahib phire haiN itraata* (He is the king's underling, watch him preen thus). Zauq promptly complained to the king about Ghalib's impertinence. When summoned by Zafar and asked to explain his effrontery, Ghalib affected an innocent air and said, 'Your majesty, I was simply quoting the maqta of my ghazal.' A suspicious Zafar asked for the full couplet, and Ghalib declaimed it thus:

> *Hua hai shah ka musaahib phire haiN itraata*
> *Vagarna shahr mein Ghalib ki aabroo kya hai*

He is the king’s underling, watch him preen thus
For otherwise, in this town, what is Ghalib’s status?

A version of the story goes that spurred on by a suspicious Zauq, Zafar demanded that Ghalib produce the entire poem. Ghalib responded by reciting an entire ghazal, which he made up on the spot. Yet again, the errant poet had been saved by his quick-wittedness.

5

1750–1850: The Urdu Century

Rekhti ke tumhiN ustaad nahiN ho Ghalib
Kehte haiN agle zamaane me koi Mir bhi tha

Ghalib, you alone are not the master of Urdu here
They say in an earlier time, there used to be a Mir

Ghalib was notoriously egoistical and wrote several verses extolling himself. In his mind he was exceptional and peerless, so coming from him, this sher in praise of Mir Taqi Mir, one of a few he wrote in appreciation of his predecessor,[1] counts as high honour indeed. Not only is Ghalib extolling Mir in the above two lines, but he is also establishing a temporal continuity between himself and a man he considers a master of his craft. That craft is the ability to write poetry in Rekhta, a term that Urdu was known by before it was formalized as a language. Ghalib uses the term ‘Rekhti’, which for our purposes can be described as the Rekhta that is utilized in poetry, especially in the ghazal. It has an interesting gendered connotation, for the beloved in the Urdu ghazal is often referred to in male terms, and male poets often affect a female persona in a remarkable act of gender fluidity.

Rekhta to Urdu

The word ‘Rekhta’ was initially pejorative, meaning ‘low’ or ‘fallen’. It was used to describe Farsi that had been ‘contaminated’ with the local dialect of Hindavi. It eventually stood in for ‘simple language’ and by degrees was accepted as ‘Urdu’, a name derived from the Turkish word

‘orda’ or military camp, where soldiers from different regions learnt to converse through a bridge language. Perhaps the transition from Rekhta, a dialect, to Urdu, a language, crystallized in the century between 1750 and 1850, a period of great flowering for the language. To place Ghalib’s work in the context of his age, it might be productive to elaborate upon the ways in which the literary tradition of Urdu accelerated during this period.

Perhaps like most languages, Urdu emerged as a separate tongue in the public consciousness by degrees. It is very clear that the argot spoken in the streets of the Indo-Gangetic plain was distinct from the formal languages of courts. Amir Khusrau began to write poetry in what we now know as Urdu in the thirteenth century CE. A version of Urdu migrated to the Deccan shortly thereafter, where it was adopted by the sixteenth-century poet king Quli Qutub Shah, as well as the seventeenth-century poet Wali Ahmed Khan, who is now remembered as Wali Dakkani.

Much of the corpus of formal Urdu poetry from those days has not survived. Its poetic traditions, however, began to gather steam at the turn of the eighteenth century. The works of poets such as Mirza Sauda and Khwaja Dard have endured and continue to be read and sung today. The arrival of Mir on the stage perhaps rescued Urdu from its over-reliance on Farsi metaphors and poetic traditions and went a long way in imbuing Rekhta with a sense of legitimacy. Mir supplied the Urdu tradition with innovative *bahr*s (rhyme schemes) and newer subject matter, and ended up creating a roadmap that future practitioners of the craft could adopt. Likewise, Sheikh Wali Muhammad (1735–1830) of Agra, who adopted the name Nazeer Akbarabadi, explored the *nazm* tradition in the ghazal-dominated canon of eighteenth-century Urdu poetry, writing verses about day-to-day activity in the bazaar in accessible language, deepening the canon of Urdu poetry.

British Engagement with Urdu

As the British began to enhance their colonial footprint westward from Bengal, they realized they needed to engage with India’s languages. In

1800, Fort William College was founded in Calcutta as a potential centre of Oriental studies. It had faculty positions in various Indian languages including Urdu to help British administrators speak the local languages with a modicum of fluency. Speaking ‘Hindustani’ was important, for it was the ‘literary language of the Musalmans and of Hindus educated on Musalman lines’. Mir Amman, a scholar from Delhi, wrote a book for the college titled *Baagh-o-Bahaar* (Garden and Bloom), which became a textbook for all British officers seeking to graduate from the college. The curriculum of Fort William College was adopted by a number of educational institutes across the country during the nineteenth century. John B. Gilchrist, a Scottish surgeon-turned-linguist, was an early professor of Hindustani at the college and wrote several tracts such as *An English–Hindustani Dictionary*, *A Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language* and *The Oriental Linguist*, which have been credited with birthing modern Urdu/Hindi prose.

Master Ramachandra (1821–80), a professor of Delhi College and a friend of Ghalib’s, wrote several books on science in Urdu, his colleague Dharm Narayan translated books on economics from English into Urdu and his student Munshi Zakaullah (1832–1910) wrote mathematical texts in Urdu and translated books on mathematics, history, geography and various works of literature into Urdu. Zakaullah’s *Tuhfatul Hisaab* (The Gift of Mathematics) was published in 1852 and reportedly sold out in three days!

The Quran was first translated into Urdu in the early nineteenth century under the auspices of Fort William College. Interestingly, various ulema protested, on the grounds that Urdu was not an ‘Islamic’ language and should not be used to study the Quran. Much later, others would claim that Urdu was the lingua franca of Muslims alone, an irony that has affected Urdu negatively over time. The *Bhagwad Gita* had been translated in the late seventeenth century into Urdu verse by a Dakkani poet named Syed Mubin. The original text of the translation, called *Krishna Gita, Arjun Gita*, has been lost to history.

Urdu in Nineteenth-Century Lucknow

The nineteenth century saw polemical battles between Lucknawi writers and their Delhi counterparts for supremacy, each faction claiming that their work represented Urdu traditions better. Lucknow was blessed by the presence of Mir Babar Ali Anees (1803–74) and Mirza Salaamat Ali Dabeer (1804–75), two poets with such incredible command over poetry that they are arguably the greatest exponents of Urdu poetry ever to have lived. Their work has tended to be undervalued somewhat because both of them wrote almost exclusively within the bounds of their religious tradition, principally composing marsiyas or elegies commemorating the events of Karbala and the travails of the family of the Prophet Mohammad. According to the literary critic Muhammad Husain Azad, Anees may have composed 10,000 elegies, while Dabeer wrote around 3000. Considering that each poem had an average of around 600 lines, this is a staggering output.

Anees and Dabeer were the stalwarts of the Lucknow scene, but they weren't the only ones. Imad Bakhsh Nasih (1776–1838) is credited with founding what is now considered the Lucknow school of Urdu poetry. His contemporary and rival Khwaja Haider Ali Aatish (1764–1846) was a great poet in his own right, as was Daya Shankar Kaul Nasim (1811–43), who wrote the epic *Gul Bakawali*, among several others.

Urdu in Nineteenth-Century Delhi

The seat of the Mughal court ensured that Delhi remained the cynosure of *Urdudaan* eyes for the immediate future. Mohammed Ibrahim Zauq (1789–1854), the poet laureate, gave voice to his love for Delhi when he was being courted by the aesthetes of the Hyderabad poetry scene. Zauq's memorable refusal of the invitation of his aficionados from the south took the form of a couplet, the second line of which Delhi-walas quote till today:

In dinoN gar-che Dakkan meiN hai badi qadr-e sukhan
Kaun jaaye Zauq par Dilli ki galiyaaN chhor kar

Although in the Deccan they value poetry these days
O Zauq, who can forsake Delhi's delightful byways?

Zauq, Momin Khan Momin (1800–51) and Ghalib constituted a triumvirate that made Delhi the seat of Urdu poetry. Patrons from Rampur and Awadh, in order to maintain their relevance in the literary world, continued to patronize poets from the capital, and despite the straitened circumstances of the Mughal court, it still leveraged its minimal purse and maximal social capital to host the most popular of mushairas. The first half of the nineteenth century saw Delhi become the site of an amazing flowering of Urdu prose and poetry. The city that had risen like the phoenix from the ashes of multiple phases of destruction, such as the brutal attacks of Timur at the turn of the fifteenth century and the depredations of Nader Shah in the mid-eighteenth century, saw a brief period of peace after the conclusion of the Second Anglo-Maratha War in 1803. Bahadur Shah Zafar's ascension to the throne in 1837 produced an interesting political situation. The British had assumed total administrative control over the region, leaving the 'Emperor of the World' with little to do. He in turn assumed the cultural leadership of the realm. The country was ruled by bureaucrats out of squat offices in Mehrauli and elsewhere, while the opulent Red Fort, with its marbled Diwaan-e Khaas and the sandstone Diwaan-e Aam, its elaborate gardens and gracefully geometric courtyards, its grandeur and its opulence, was really the site of empty but fastidious ritual.

Urdu in Zafar's Court

Being a poet himself, Zafar began to patronize the arts with zeal. Musicians, painters and poets flocked to the Red Fort in droves. Courtly protocol was observed to the hilt. Mushairas were conducted with the seriousness and fervour of religious events, and the most successful

gatherings were those where the sovereign himself sent his work to be recited. Zafar was known to write his poems in his own hand, deft as he was at calligraphy. In keeping with his royal station, he rarely recited his own work, leaving it to an appointed emissary, usually his son Prince Fakhruddin, who in time transcended his nickname of ‘Mirza Fakhru’ to become Fateh-ul Mulk Shah Bahadur.

These glorious appellations were of course to come to naught after the bloodletting of 1857, but that was still a ways away. Zafar was busy writing commentaries on Farsi poets such as Saadi, Ghalib and Zauq were having some of their famous contretemps, Momin was juggling a dual career as a doctor and a man of letters, and a variety of minor poets strove gamely to rise above their station through their mushaira performances. Each master poet had a retinue of pupils, known as *shaagird*s, whose work they shaped and tried to promote. Everything came to a head during the major mushairas, which were held sporadically but were grand affairs. In a fictional account of a mushaira held in 1845 titled *Dilli ki Aakhri Shama* (The Last Lamp of Delhi), Mirza Farhatullah Baig describes one in loving detail, including the manner in which entrepreneurs set up the event, the protracted negotiations between the organizers and poets (the bards were notoriously sensitive about who was invited first and who got to recite later, for it reflected stature), the layout of the hall, the actual poems recited by different poets, the audience reactions along with a series of delightful anecdotes about the personages and their relationships.

Perhaps the term ‘aakhri shama’ could only have been coined in hindsight. 1857 closed the doors of the Red Fort to literary activities for a long time. Delhi’s destruction after the mutiny meant that a lot else was destroyed with it, including the network of poetry and patronage. What rose from its ashes later was a very different scene, in which the romantic traditions of the nineteenth century began to be critiqued as relics of a decadent past. Newer poets looked westward for their inspiration, but elaboration on that must be left for another book.

Urdu after Ghalib

Two post-1857 developments of note must be mentioned. First was the southward migration of the locus of Urdu literary activity. Dagh Dehlvi (1831–1905), for example, moved to Hyderabad, and a host of poets followed. Aligarh and Hyderabad became the seats of universities that nurtured Urdu in the post-1857 era. These institutions sought to develop an Urdu-based curriculum for an emerging modern era, and more importantly, provided a critical mass for Urdu speakers and literary figures, who nurtured the poetry tradition in a harmonious cycle of writers and readers, performers and listeners.

The second was the emergence of institutions of mass publication in Urdu. The inauguration in 1858 of the Nawal Kishore Press and Book Depot in Lucknow by the twenty-two-year-old Munshi Nawal Kishore, who has been called ‘the Caxton of India’ after the fifteenth-century British merchant William Caxton, who had introduced the first retail press in England in 1476. Over a three-decade period, the Nawal Kishore Press printed around 5000 books in a variety of languages. Many of Ghalib’s works were published by this institution, which became a pillar of modern Urdu. Newspapers in Urdu had already started publishing, most notably the *Dilli Urdu Akhbaar* in 1837 and the *Sayyid ul Akhbaar* in 1841. The marriage of a living language and a modern technology eventually led to its popularization and democratization well beyond the period we now contingently recognize as its cultural zenith.

Once a language is adopted by the populace, it is hard to scrub out. Urdu survived and continues to thrive to this day. It would be a gross exaggeration to credit a small group of people with is popularity. But it behooves us to appreciate the period from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century as a special time, if not as a flowering, then perhaps as a seeding, when a dialect argot emerged as a fully formed language with its own enviable literary tradition. In a fashion, a linguistic and poetic door was opened for a stalwart such as Ghalib to walk in.

6

Ghalib in the Here and Now

Hui muddat ke Ghalib mar gaya par yaad aata hai
Vo har ek baat par kehna ke yooN hota to kya hota

We remember, though it's been ages since Ghalib's dead
'Had it been so, how would it be?' constantly he'd said

In May 2016, Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft, visited India. The audience at New Delhi welcomed a favourite son who had done well. Addressing the Microsoft India programme titled 'Tech for Good, Ideas for India', Nadella began by saying, 'I have only two passions that have driven my dreams—poetry and computer science.' Nadella then quoted Ghalib, *hazaaron khwaahisheN aisi, ke har khwaahish pe dum nikle, bahut nikle mere armaan, lekin phir bhi kam nikle* (thousands of desires, and each one worth dying for; many of my desires were fulfilled, but yet, they appear few).

Likewise, when Justice Markandey Katju delivered a landmark judgment in a euthanasia case in March 2011, he prefaced his consequential verdict by quoting Ghalib again, *marte haiN aarzoo meiN marne ki, maut aati hai par nahiN aati* (I die in my desire for death, but death, while ever present, eludes me).

In Pakistan, when the minister for finance, Miftah Ismail, unveiled a controversial national budget in April 2018, he responded to boos in the audience by quoting Ghalib, *likhte rahe junooN ke hikayaat-e khooN-chakaaN, har-chand is meiN haath hamaare qalam hue* (we kept writing the blood-splattered stories of passion, even though our hands were cut off in punishment).

I quote these incidents as examples of how Ghalib's verse swirls around us in the twenty-first century, never leaving us, like a signpost of times that were and times that are yet to come. Ghalib may be dead and gone, but he remains with us, like a blessing, like a teacher whose words inspire us well after the lesson is done.

Ghalib, Life After Death

Thanks to his wonderful poetry and his prodigious output, Ghalib was never lost to history. His poems continue to be sung and performed and have offered literary and poetic signposts for generations of poets. He was fortunate enough to have been admired in his lifetime, and biographies followed soon after his death. Altaf Husain Hali, his junior contemporary, wrote his biography, *Yadgaar-e Ghalib*, in 1897 and opened a veritable floodgate. Hali's biography immortalized Ghalib with many an anecdote, and he continued to be written about by scholars and aficionados. Muhammad Husain Azad's earlier *Aab-e Hayat* (1880), considered the definitive volume of literary criticism of its time, had already included a long exegesis on Ghalib.

Ghalib has been analysed often, by poets, scholars and critics, each seeking to find special entry points into his life and work. Not only are there several books on him, but there are books about books on Ghalib, producing a meta-bibliographic spectrum. His work continues to offer us inside views of the ethos of his time, his metaphysics and his milieu. Works of Ghalib that were hitherto unknown have been recovered as late as the mid-twentieth century, such as when an older divaan titled *Gul-e Raana* (Scarlet Rose), comprising many Urdu and Farsi poems and compiled when Ghalib was in his twenties, was discovered by the scholar Malik Ram and eventually published in 1970.

Ghalib has been translated into several languages. To sample some, we find *Ghaliber Kobita*, a Bengali translation by Shakti Chattopadhyay and Ain Rasheed, or a Telugu translation titled *Ghalib Kavita Kaumudi* by Ramchander Deekonda. Outside the subcontinent, there are works in

Russian by Natalia Prigarina, in Norwegian by Knut Kristiansen, in Dutch by Nachoem Wijnberg and hosts of others. The American poet Adrienne Rich had a section titled ‘Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib’ in her book of poetry titled *Leaflets*. Celal Soydan translated Ghalib’s works into Turkish, perhaps completing a reverse gift from Urdu to the language from which it has borrowed quite a bit of vocabulary. All these translations were published in the past fifty years, indicating that Ghalib’s global footprint has only been enhanced with time.

Ghalib, Performed

Ghalib’s work has transcended media and entered seamlessly into the world of performance. There has rarely been a singer of note in the subcontinent who has not performed Ghalib’s works, and ghazals of Ghalib have been turned into innumerable albums in the music industry. Be it Jagjit Singh or Nayyara Noor, Lata Mangeshkar or Ghulam Ali, many stalwart singers in South Asia have tried their hand at singing his work, thereby popularizing it amongst the current generation. Music groups such as Rhythm Invincible India from India and Junoon from Pakistan have performed Ghalib’s work as rock songs. Type ‘Ghalib’ into the search box on YouTube, and it throws up a veritable plethora of performance art, underscoring the ubiquity and variety of performances of his work.

Ghalib has also been the subject of many a dramatic performance, such as Khwaja Moinuddin’s iconic 1956 play, *Mirza Ghalib Bunder Road Par* (Ghalib on Bunder Road, referring to a road in modern Karachi associated with artists), which was a big hit in Pakistan. S.M. Mehdi wrote *Ghalib Kaun Hai* (Who is Ghalib) in 1968, and the play remains in print and performance to this day. The Marathi play *Mi Ghalib* by Om Bhutkar was written and performed several times in the twenty-first century.

The emergence of Ghalib as a subject of movies and television scripts began with the release of Sohrab Modi’s hit *Mirza Ghalib* in 1954, based on a screenplay by Sa’adat Hasan Manto. Sampooran Singh Gulzar’s serial *Mirza Ghalib*, released in 1988 on Doordarshan, reintroduced Ghalib to a

new generation and arguably remains one of the most influential representations of the bard in popular culture. Gulzar's serial has been endlessly circulated, on television and on a variety of media, and its soundtrack remains immensely popular amongst the youth of today. Gulzar must be credited as one of those who has invoked Ghalib repeatedly in his work. We remember the 1975 film *Mausam* (Season), where Ghalib's sher, *jee dhoondta hai phir wahi fursat ke raat din* (the heart searches for those days and nights of leisure), formed a *mukhda* of a song. Likewise, *ishq par zor nahiN hai ye vo aatish Ghalib, jo lagaaye na lage aur bujhaaye na bane* (love is uncompelled, Ghalib; it is a fire that is slow to ignite, but impossible to put out) forms a haunting refrain in the title song of the 1998 film *Dil Se* (From the Heart).

Ghalib, the Viral Internet Star

Googling 'Ghalib' throws up many hits. There are numerous Internet sites devoted to him, and sites on Urdu poetry feature him prominently. I refer to some of the more serious sites in my bibliographic essay in Appendix 2. Many fans of Ghalib provide occasional verses of his ghazals for periodic consumption. #Ghalib is a popular hashtag on Instagram. Be it Twitter or Snapchat, Facebook or WhatsApp, Ghalib's couplets circulate relentlessly on social media.

A humorous sidelight is the circulation of terrible poetry on social media that is attributed to Ghalib. Consider for example this verse I received on WhatsApp recently, purportedly written by Ghalib: *Umr bhar yehi bhool karta raha; dhool chehre par thi aur aaina saaf karta raha* (I kept making the same mistakes all my life; I had dust on my forehead and kept cleaning the mirror). The absence of any continuity of *bahr, radeef* and *qaafiya* should alert anyone that this cannot belong to the master. But it did garner its share of *waah waah*s in the forum where it was circulated; Ghalib's name has that cachet—it even legitimizes bad poetry!

Indeed, when newer forms of communication emerge, Ghalib will be represented, in keeping with his concept of himself as being way ahead of

his time. In his own words:

HooN garmi-e nishaat-e tasavvur se naghma-sanj
Main andaleeb-e gulshan-e na-aafareeda hooN

Behold, I sing in the passionate joy of imagination
For I’m the nightingale of the yet uncreated garden.

PART II

1

The Ghazal Introduced

Ghalib wrote in many genres. The masnawi (epic poem), the qaseeda (a panegyric, or a poem extolling an individual or event), the salaam (an elegy to commemorate a tragedy) and prose are part of his oeuvre. His letters have been considered amongst the finest forms of accessible Urdu prose. However, it is safe to say that he is best known for his ghazals, and we will use this chapter to discuss the ghazal in general.

The ghazal form of poetry emerged out of Arabia in the eighth and ninth centuries CE. It is not to say that the form did not exist before that period, but it was usually subsumed under a longer poem, such as a qaseeda. The qaseeda would have several moments (akin to chapters in a book), and one of them, typically a part of its opening known as the *nasib* (prelude), was composed using the format we now associate with the ghazal. The nasib was often used to extol the beloved in romanticized language and became one of the most popular elements of the qaseeda.

During the period of the Omayyads, poets began to construct stand-alone ghazals. From the very beginning, the ghazal was associated with a romanticism that would prove to be its calling card, and in many ways, its fatal flaw, as later generations of people began to tire of its limiting range. However, the ghazal was eventually exported across geographies and languages and adopted with gusto by Persian poets. The more skilled of the Persians, such as Saadi (Abu-Mohammad Muslih al-Din bin Abdullah Shirazi, 1210–91) and Hafez (Khwaja Shams-ud Din Moḥammad Hafez-e Shiraz, 1315–90), took the ghazal to dizzying heights. They transposed

social and mystical themes into the romantic thematic, to the point that their collections of ghazals became revered as quasi-religious tracts.

One interesting way in which the ghazal became a part of the cultural practices in Iran was the Faal-e Hafez (Divination of Hafez). The practice went that if someone found it difficult to reach a decision about a complex problem, they would meditate on the question and open a book of Hafez's ghazals. The ghazal that the book would open to would provide a direction that would help the person make a decision.

From Farsi, the ghazal migrated to Urdu quite seamlessly. Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), a poet whose lifespan straddled those of Saadi and Hafez, wrote a number of ghazals in Rekhta/Hindavi, a proto-Urdu dialect, and from then on, the ghazal became the hegemonic form of poetic expression in Urdu. Despite protestations from the 'cognoscenti' that it was an inferior mode of poetry, the ghazal remained popular through the centuries, boasting proponents such as Quli Qutub Shah (d. 1612), Wali Dakkani (1667–1707), Mirza Sauda (1713–81), Khwaja Mir Dard (1721–85), Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810), Insha Allah Khan Insha (1756–1817), Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862) and Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq (1789–1854), and in the hands of a master like Ghalib, developed a rapier-like intensity. Its hegemony was finally put to rest only in the mid-twentieth century when the progressive poets of the subcontinent fleshed out the realist and anti-capitalist sentiments of the times into a movement that brought the nazm (poetry unconfined by specific protocols of form) tradition into a position of prominence. Modern and post-modern poets went in multiple ways with the nazm, breaking free of the imposed shackles of rhyme and metre and inventing newer metaphors to tackle a variety of contemporary themes. In that regard, these poetic formations reflected similar trends in most other languages. But with the passing of time, the ghazal has continued to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century. Contemporary mushairas in Urdu often come alive when ghazals are recited, and people across socio-economic classes are known to use ash'aar from popular ghazals to make a point or to emphasize one. It is

safe to say that the ghazal is such an integral part of Urdu that it will live on as an important poetic form as long as the language is spoken.

What Is a Ghazal? Form

Debates about what constitutes a ghazal have often tended to devolve into mere discussions about its structure and form. We must traverse this path as well, however briefly, but follow it up with some discussion about its aesthetics and content as well.

The ghazal constitutes a relatively formal structure, with a string of ash'aar[1] common in metre, that is, the first and second lines have the same number of syllables. The number of syllables in a ghazal and the way they are stressed is known as bahr. Every second line of a couplet in a ghazal shares a rhythmic continuity with every other second line through two artefacts, known as the qaafiya and the radeef. To explain these in concrete terms, let us take an example of three ash'aar of one of Ghalib's ghazals. The lines go thus:

> *NuktacheeN hai gham-e dil usko sunaaye na bane*
> *Kya bane baat jahaaN baat banaaye na bane*
>
> *Keh sake kaun ke ye jalvagari kis ki hai*
> *Parda chhora hai vo us ne ke uthaaye na bane*
>
> *Ishq par zor nahiN hai ye vo aatish Ghalib*
> *Jo lagaaye na lage aur bujhaaye na bane*
>
> Heartache now judges me, but speaking out is impossible
> A situation where peace is brought about is impossible
>
> Whose tableau is this? He is hidden in such a curtain
> Lifting it, even for the most devout is impossible
>
> Love is unbound Ghalib, for it's such an intense fire
> To light it is difficult but to put out is impossible

The rhyme in this ghazal derives primarily from the qaafiya, which in this case comes from the rhyming of sunaaye, banaaye, uthaaye and bujhaaye.

It is here that the creativity of the poet is tested the most. The radeef in this ghazal is ‘na bane’, which is a base on which the ghazal stands. In this case, every second line of every couplet ends with the words ‘na bane’ (the radeef), and that phrase is preceded by a word that rhymes with sunaaye (the qaafiya). Ghazals typically contain between five and twenty couplets, which are not necessarily connected to each other in a narrative continuity.

Two more elements of the ghazal to keep in mind are the matla and the maqta. The matla is a sher in the ghazal, usually the first couplet, where both lines rhyme. The first sher in the above ghazal is a matla. A ghazal may have more than one matla. The maqta is that sher of a ghazal, which contains the poet’s name as a signature (the signature is known as the takhallus). The third sher I have quoted above is the maqta. Often, a poet may have more than one takhallus. Ghalib had two: Ghalib, and occasionally Asad. For example:

> *Main ne MajnuN pe ladakpan meiN Asad*
> *Sang uthaya tha ke sar yaad aaya*
>
> In my childhood, Asad
> I raised a stone to strike Majnu dead
> But then,
> I remembered my own head

Typically, the maqta is the last sher of the ghazal. But poets may choose to tweak the format and place the maqta elsewhere.

What Is a Ghazal? Content

Having discussed the form of the ghazal, let us briefly discuss it as an aesthetic tradition rather than a poetic form derived solely from its structure. The ghazal has at its core a preponderance of amorous, romantic and erotic imagery. Therefore, there is a tendency amongst critics to classify a number of poems that follow its form as non-ghazals. For example, Ghalib’s elegy on the death of his adopted son, Arif: *laazim tha ke dekho mera rasta koi din aur* (appropriate it would be, had you waited

for me some more), may be considered by some as a non-ghazal because it is a lament that is devoid of romantic themes. Likewise, Ghalib's *Maafinaama* (Apology) translated earlier, a poem that essentially carried on a conversation, is not considered a ghazal despite a near perfect adherence to its form, for similar reasons. However, the division of poems into ghazals and non-ghazals is arbitrary and subject to contestation.

Over time, a variety of themes and motifs have begun to be associated with the ghazal genre, including the *zaalim* (tyrant) beloved and the *bismil* (suffering) lover, the beloved as a flame (shama) and the protagonist lover as the moth (*parwaana*) destined to die a fiery death, the beloved as a murderer (*qaatil*), a stone (*sanam*) and so on. A number of bahrs were dreamed up by the masters and imitated by their students, leading to an isomorphism that sedimented into a canonical tradition that brooked no innovation. In addition, the pedagogical tradition of *islaah* (apprenticeship) meant that each novice poet took his or her work to a master, who steered them towards a convergence of themes. An unimaginative poet could conceivably read several ghazals of earlier poets, and mashing up older ideas and radeef–qaafiya pairs, could generate a ghazal. Indeed, many ghazals are highly derivative, and perhaps the preponderance of bad ghazals has contributed to a poor opinion of the genre. *Shaayar nahiN hai vo jo ghazalkhwaaN hai aaj kal*, they are not poets who write ghazals, went one contemptuous refrain.

Inevitably, broadsides against the ghazal began to be fired. The first salvo came from the early modernists. Literary critics such as Mohammad Husain Azad (the writer of *Aab-e Hayaat*, The Water of Life, an influential book of literary criticism that was first published in 1880) and Altaf Husain Hali, as well as social reformers such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (the founder of Aligarh Muslim University) and others had begun to deride the 'decadent' content of classical ghazals, arguing that Urdu poetry, in the tradition of the English poets of the romantic era (Wordsworth, Coleridge and others), needed to focus on more 'natural' motifs rather than the amorous. They recommended the contemplation of loftier thoughts such as the nature of virtue, and other forms of love such as the love of the nation.

More significantly, they critiqued the ghazal as a marker of a moribund era, one that had let people down and encouraged poets and their readers to wallow in empty nostalgia.

These reactions must be seen in hindsight as responses to modernity, industrialization, disillusionment with feudal aristocracy, and perhaps above all, a defensive reaction to the defeat of the mutineers at the hands of the British. Be that as it may, the ghazal has had to endure its share of criticism. Much of these critiques were, however, the stuff of caricature. Unbeknownst to these critics, the ghazal had already incorporated several of these suggestions, such as the need to go beyond romance. One only needed to know where to look.

The Afterlife of the Ghazal

The twentieth century inaugurated an era of social activism in the subcontinent, much of it expressed in the freedom movement, and the adoption of socialist goals as governing principles of society. The reverberations of these movements expressed themselves in the poetic arena, and the nazm became more prominent. Also, as people began to engage in socially relevant forms of literary expression, they articulated their frustration with older forms of literature, including poetry. For example, the Progressive Writers' Association, an influential group of leftist South Asian literary figures who were led by Urdu writers, wrote a manifesto in 1936 in which they criticized 'literature [that] was produced particularly during the past two centuries, one of the most unfortunate periods of our history, a period of disintegrating feudalism and of acute misery and degradation for the Indian people as a whole.' They wanted 'to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long . . .' The implicit critique of the ghazal tradition in this approach is easy to spot.

However, socialist critique was not necessarily incompatible with the aesthetic form and accepted metaphors of the ghazal. Progressive poets incorporated themes such as freedom, equality, rebellion and revolution

into a linguistic tradition that deployed metaphors and rhyme schemes that adhered to the ghazal form. They introduced these themes into their poems while keeping them within the structural boundaries of the ghazal. Often, this was accomplished by producing a set of binaries between the purity of love (*ishq, pyaar*) and the corruption of the world, represented by tyranny, wealth, the throne, or even god (*zulm, zar/daulat, takht, khudaai*). The struggle between the subaltern lovers and the dominant social order was invoked by the poet as a symbol of other battles between those who were driven by passion and those who valued money and power. Sahir's defiant words resound in a song from the 1963 film *Taj Mahal*:

> *Takht kya cheez hai, aur laal-o javaahar hai kya*
> *Pyaar vaale to khudaai bhi luta dete haiN*
>
> What price this throne, what value these jewels?
> True lovers will even spurn god's kingdom

While the themes pursued by Urdu poets of the progressive tradition were defiantly anti-romantic, they often exhibited a similarity in their use of language and metaphors to the classical poets. Consider these two ash'aar by Sahir:

> *TarabzaaroN pe kya guzri sanamkhaanoN pe kya guzri*
> *Dil-e zinda teri marhoom armaanoN pe kya guzri*
>
> What came of music houses and temples, my throbbing heart?
> What happened to your desires, as they were torn apart?
>
> or
>
> *Aqaa'id vahm hai mazhab khayaal-e khaam hai saaqi*
> *Azal se zahn-e insaaN basta-e auhaam hai saaqi*
>
> O cupbearer, religion and faith are but superstitions
> Blind customs have for aeons imprisoned imaginations

The first is the matla of a poem where Sahir laments the partition of the subcontinent, while the second, also a matla, inaugurates a spirited poem

against religion and an explicit defence of atheism. Sahir would perhaps have been offended if he had been considered a ghazal poet, and indeed, in defiance of the ghazal tradition, he did not adopt a takhallus and never wrote a maqta. But it is safe to say that both in their form and structure, the above two verses exhibit similarities with ash'aar from a ghazal.

One could offer examples galore from the progressive tradition to show how the poetic tools utilized by these artists are hardly distinguishable from those that abound in the classical form of ghazal poetry. Perhaps the point is made emphatically in a maqta of a poem by Majrooh:

Meri nigaah meiN hai arz-e Moscow Majrooh
Vo sar-zameeN ke sitaare jise salaam kareN

My mind O Majrooh, is fixed on Moscow
The land before which even stars must bow

The progressive poets ironically enriched the ghazal tradition despite their derision of it, recalling Ghalib's mastery of Urdu poetry despite his considering it inferior. Likewise, be they modernists such as Miraji and N.M. Rashed or contemporary exponents of free verse such as Javed Akhtar and Gulzar, poets have continually tried their hand at the ghazal. And somewhere along the line, they have always been in awe of Ghalib. To quote the great socialist poet Ali Sardar Jafri:

Aaye hum Ghalib-o Iqbal ke naghmaat ke baad
Muzhaf-e ishq-o junooN, huq ke madaaraat ke baad

After the songs of Ghalib and Iqbal did we arrive
To keep the traditions of love, passion and truth alive.

2

Anatomy of a Ghazal by Ghalib

Like Saint Peter securing the gates of heaven, or perhaps like Cerberus the hound guarding the gates of Hades, Ghalib's first ghazal in his divaan stands sentinel over his oeuvre, daring only the bravest to enter. Its first sher itself is a marvel of multiple meanings, ambiguous references and warnings to unprepared readers that this is not 'business as usual' in ghazal-land. Perhaps it is a caution for the timid not to venture further should they not be able to handle this style of poetry; or is it an invitation, a promise that more hidden gems lie in store? The references in different ash'aar recall history, legend and mythology, and the symmetries of the poem are exquisite.

Ghalib is reputed to have written this ghazal when he was a mere teenager. Many commentaries (*sharaah*) about this ghazal written by a variety of critics across time and space impute different meanings to the verses therein, of which there are a mere five. But five verses are enough to let the serious aesthete know they are in the presence of incomparable mastery. In this short chapter, I wish to explore this ghazal in detail, so as to provide a template by which this poetic tradition can be better understood.

Let us begin by recalling the entire ghazal and providing a somewhat literal translation.

Naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tehreer ka
Kaghazi hai pairahan har paikar-e tasveer ka

Kaav kaav-e sakht-jaani haai tanhaai na poochh
Subha karna shaam ka laana hai ju-e-sheer ka

Jazba-e be-ikhtiyaar-e shauq dekha chaahiye
Seena-e shamsheer se baahar hai dum shamsheer ka

Aagahi daam-e shunidaaN jis qadar chaahe bichhaaye
Muddu'aa anqa hai apni aalam-e tehreer ka

Bus-ke hooN Ghalib aseeri meiN bhi aatish zer-e pa
Muu-e aatish-deeda hai halqa meri zanjeer ka

Whose creativity does creation complain about?
Every picture appears wearing paper robes

Digging through the tough life is such loneliness
Turning night to morning is like drawing out a river of milk

The passion of love is truly a sight to behold
The edge of the sword has broken out of the scabbard

Awareness casts its mindful snares, precision is preferred
But my writings seek the quality of the ephemeral bird

Ghalib, even in servitude my feet are afire
Each link on my chain is afire like a singed hair

If you as a reader are confounded by these verses, it may gratify you to know you are not alone; they mystified Ghalib's peers as well. The verses do not lend themselves to easy interpretation, but definitely reward those who stay with the layered meanings they contain. Much like other ghazals, the different couplets herein are not necessarily related to each other. However, this is not to say they are totally scattered. Rather, the ghazal is held together not merely by its adherence to form, but also by a fidelity to an ambience that provides coherence, just as a raga in Indian classical music might hold a musical composition together.

Let us begin with the matla.

Naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tehreer ka
Kaghazi hai pairahan har paikar-e tasveer ka

It bears repeating that the matla announces the ghazal's bahr, radeef and qaafiya. The bahr in this ghazal consists of fourteen syllables, some short

and some long, that when recited orally, produce a rhythm and cadence that lend themselves to performance, be it declamatory (*taht-ul lafz*) or in musical tone (*tarannum*). The radeef is the word ‘ka’. So we know that every second line in every subsequent sher will end with the word ‘ka’. The first qaafiya is the word ‘tehreer’, so we know that the penultimate word in each second line will have to rhyme with tehreer. To the matla falls the additional burden of having both lines rhyme thus.

The meaning of this famous verse actually hinges on a few metaphors. The wearing of paper robes refers to an ancient Persian custom where complainants to the king dressed in paper to signify their unhappiness. The word ‘naqsh’ refers to a creation, which in this version is an aggrieved party (faryadi). Imagine a painting being upset with the painter, or a statue being dismayed by the sculptor who created it. The reference here is most likely to humans being upset with god. Perhaps Ghalib is upset with god for the imperfection in his creation (the human); perhaps he is lauding humanity for its ability to critique god. In the end, Ghalib’s verse goes back to the determinism versus free will debate that characterized modernity. Perhaps humans, in their efforts at self-actualization, come up against the hard boundaries of fate and structure and complain to god. Several of Ghalib’s other ash’aar have given voice to this complaint of humans. In another sher (*na tha kuch to khuda tha* . . . translated elsewhere in this volume), he asks the same question in another way: ‘When there was nothing, there was god, had there been nothing, there would be god. I was doomed by my existence, what if I had not been?’

Kaav kaav-e sakht-jaani hai tanhaai na poochh
Subha karna shaam ka laana hai ju-e-sheer ka

The second verse of the ghazal recalls the famous legend of Shirin–Farhad, popular all across Iran and the subcontinent. The story was mentioned in Firdausi’s tenth-century opus *Shahnameh* and narrated as a stand-alone story by the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi, and is one of the paradigmatic stories of unrealized love.

The theme here is one of excavation. As the legend goes, a poor sculptor named Farhad fell in love with Shirin, an Armenian princess of incomparable beauty. His rival in love was the Sasanian king Khosrau. Khosrau began to hate Farhad and exiled him to Mount Behistun, giving him the impossible task of carving a path out of the Pillarless Mountain (*koh-e be-sutoon*). He told Farhad that Shirin could be his if he could get milk through the mountain for Shirin to bathe in. Farhad set about his task with the zeal of a mad lover and almost accomplished it till he was treacherously betrayed.

Ghalib compares his own life with the labour of Farhad. For him, moving from day to day (*subha karna shaam ka*, turning evening to morning) is as difficult as Farhad's labour. The metaphor is used in multiple ways, evoking digging through life (*kaav kaav-e*). The parable of Sisyphus is another metaphor that may occur to the reader acquainted with multiple mythical traditions, but ultimately it speaks of how life is hard, perhaps for the same subject as the one in the matla.

> *Jazba-e be-ikhtiyaar-e shauq dekha chahiye*
> *Seena-e shamsheer se baahar hai dum shamsheer ka*

The third verse begins to offer a glimmer of opposition to the forces against which the poet finds himself arrayed. After all, what animated Farhad was his passion, over which he himself had no control (*jazba-e be-ikhtiyaar*), which was fuelled in turn by his own longing (shauq).

The passion of the lover is indeed a sight to behold, and Ghalib further elaborates on it through the second line. The edge of the sword is of course what is felt first by the martyr, and Ghalib is implying that even before it strikes, the lover can feel it, with passion. The word 'dam' means the edge of the sword, but it also means 'breath', and Ghalib's wordplay shows us a sight of a breathing sword. The true lover does not fear death and even welcomes it.[1]

Interestingly, this sher was quoted by Bhagat Singh in his notebook as he awaited his fate in a British jail in 1931.

Aagahee daam-e shunidaN jis qadar chaahe bichhaaye
Muddu'aa anqa hai apni aalam-e tehreer ka

The fourth sher can be read as a manifesto of sorts by Ghalib. The subject here is defiant that he does not seek apprehensible meaning in his poetry but would rather settle for the ephemeral world of feelings. He shuns the finality of cognition, opting instead for the ambiguous world of sensemaking. The anqa is a mythical bird of Islamic mythology, which has been referred to by many a Sufi mystic, and may loosely correspond to the phoenix. It is a bird without a material body and therefore impossible to capture.

In my understanding here, the person who seeks a singular perception in poetry is cast in the role of a hunter. The hunter sets snares of understanding (daam-e shuneedaaN) to entrap writing (tehreer), but Ghalib is not fooled. For him, his desire (muddu'aa) is to foil the hunter by imbuing his works with the characteristics of a mythical bird.

It is also important to note that Ghalib often casts himself in the role of an outsider and for him, the purveyors of meaning (maani) are often in search of praise (sataaish) or reward (sila). His ash'aar also represent treasure troves of meaning to him (*ganjina-e maani*) but are more like magical spells (tilism). These ideas are explored in other ash'aar, which have been translated later in this book.

The final sher is the maqta, where Ghalib signs his name (takhallus) into the verse. It is worth remembering that Ghalib assumed the pen name 'Ghalib' around the time he wrote this poem; it could well have been the first ghazal where he used this nom de plume. 'Ghalib' means overpowering, and one imagines he used the name self-consciously, incorporating its meaning into the verse.

Bus-ke hooN Ghalib aseeri meiN bhi aatish zer-e paa
Muu-e aatish-deeda hai halqa meri zanjeer ka

Here, Ghalib fantasizes himself imprisoned (aseer), but still restless, in fact so restless that there is a fire under his feet (*aatish zer-e paa*). Free

will, which stands in for restlessness, chafes against the determinism of fate that incarceration represents.

The second line provides a vivid example of how Ghalib fleshes out the intrigue that his first line creates. It is important to remember that the ghazal is a performative poem, and the first line is often meant to produce suspense or a conundrum or something unexplained, which is resolved with a flourish in the second. So the poet is Ghalib (overpowering), aseer (incarcerated) and aatish zer-e paa (raring to go). How so? Ghalib explains that every link of his chain (*zanjeer ka halqa*) is *muu-e aatish deeda* (like a singed hair). Perhaps the fire under Ghalib's feet is melting the chains, such that while he is being burnt, he is also in the process of setting himself free. Fire causes pain but also melts chains, just as the ability to face up to pain releases the poet from bondage, till he becomes truly 'Ghalib'.

This ghazal is notoriously abstruse, and my interpretations are subject to contestation by those who may find a different set of meanings in the same words. But that is precisely the beauty of a poem. Its words are fixed but invite a hermeneutic fluidity where interpretation can be layered upon interpretation in an endless daisy-chain of understanding. A good poem demands nothing less.

One thing to note here is that this ghazal is relatively free of ash'aar that extol amorous love. It is interesting that the first ghazal in Ghalib's divaan challenges one of the fundamental assumptions made about the ghazal (or perhaps clarifies a major misconception about it). A ghazal is not a slave to amatory sentiment; it can and often does break free of the shackles.

Likewise, Ghalib fortifies his verses with philosophical insights that incorporate modernity and Sufi spiritualism. He engages with the divine in debate and accusation, speaks of the need to be outside the boundaries of meaning, and visualizes a world where free will can transcend fate. To imagine this poem written by a nineteen-year-old is to wonder what might happen if the poet's potential were truly achieved. Luckily, we do not have to wonder. Despite a life of deprivation lived in an era of upheaval, Ghalib did manage to achieve his potential to the extent that he delights us even

in the present and will provide similar delights to future generations as well.

3

Ash’aar

Surma-e muft-nazar hooN, meri qeemat ye hai
Ke rahe chashm-e khareedaar pe ehsaaN mera

I am the kohl that adorns the eye
My only price is your grateful sigh

~

Vo aaye ghar meiN hamaare, khuda ki qudrat hai
Kabhi hum un ko, kabhi apne ghar ko dekhte haiN

He visits my house! It is truly god’s grace
I gaze at my humble home, and then his face![1]

[Alternative:
She enters my abode as my honoured guest
I gaze in wonderment, thus my home is blest!]

~

Kaun hota hai hareef-e mai-e mard-afgan-e ishq
Hai mukarrar lab-e saaqi meiN sala mere baad

Who dare drink this hemlock of love?
Anyone?
The question lingers on the wine bearer’s lips
After I’ve gone

~

Ji dhoondta hai phir vahi fursat ke raat din
Baithe raheN tasavvur-e jaanaaN kiye hue

The mind harks back to those days and nights of leisure

That were spent lost in thoughts of my love, with pleasure

~

Dekho mujhe jo deeda-e ibrat-nigaah ho
Meri suno jo gosh-e naseehat-niyosh hai

Look my sad way if you wish to avoid ways to fail
Hear my story if you need a cautionary tale

~

Aur baazaar se le aaye agar toot gaya
Saaghar-e Jam se mera jaam-e sifaal achchha hai

Bring another from the store should this one break
My earthen cup is better than Jamshed's bowl[2]

[Alternative, Haiku style:
My earthen cup breaks
Buy another, lo it's whole
Try that, Jamshed's bowl!]

~

Be-dar-o deevaar sa ek ghar banaaya chaahiye
Koi hamsaaya na ho aur paasbaaN koi na ho

In a house sans door nor wall, then let us dwell
No intrusive neighbour and no sentinel

~

Is saadgi pe kaun na mar jaaye ai khuda
Ladte haiN aur haath meiN talvaar bhi nahiN

Such innocence is worth dying for, my word
That my love went to battle without a sword!

~

Khulta kisi pe kyoN mere dil ka moaamla
SheroN ke intikhaab ne rusva kiya mujhe

Who could have plumbed my mind for its deepest secrets?
But my choice of couplets has left me shamefaced

[Alternative:
My deepest thoughts now lay arrayed
I was alas by my poems betrayed]

~

Na sataish ki tamanna na sile ki parvaah
Gar nahiN haiN mere ash'aar meiN maani na sahi

I crave no praise, nor my work for reward I submit
If my verses are seen to lack meaning, so be it!

~

Mujh ko dayaar-e ghair meiN maara vatan se duur
Rakh li mere khuda ne meri bekasi ki sharm

I was killed in strange climes, in lands far away
My kind lord spared that shame at home today

~

MehrbaaN ho ke bula lo mujhe chaaho jis waqt
MaiN gaya waqt nahiN hooN ke phir aa bhi na sakooN

Call me whenever and thus you will learn
I am not spent time that can't return!

~

Maut ka ek din muayyan hai
Neend kyoN raat bhar nahiN aati

Death is predestined for a specific day
Why then does sleep elude you tonight? Do say.

4

Maqtey

Aate hain ghaib se ye mazaameeN khayaal meiN
Ghalib sareer-e khaama navaa-e sarosh hai

These rare ideas I dare invent
A zephyr from paradise brings,
The sounds of Ghalib's pen on parchment
Are the flutter of angel wings

~

Ganjeena-e maani ka tilism us ko samajhiye
Jo lafz, ke Ghalib mere ash'aar meiN aave

Think of them as spells that unlock riches of nuance
The words that you will find in Ghalib's verses perchance

~

Ghalib-e khasta ke baghair kaun se kaam band haiN
Roiye zaar kya, keejiye haai haai kyoN

What has been interrupted since that wretched Ghalib left?
Why howl so? Why shed those tears? Why do you feel bereft?

~

Bana kar faqeeroN ka hum bhes Ghalib
Tamaasha-e ahl-e karam dekhte haiN

Ghalib, I disguise myself and don a beggar's garment
To watch the sordid spectacle of the 'munificent'

~

Bekhudi be-sabab nahiN Ghalib
Kuch to hai jis ki parda-daari hai

Ghalib, this disinterest is surely not innocent
Concealed, I'm sure, is a hidden intent

~

Hum ko maaloom hai jannat ki haqeeqat lekin
Dil ke khush rakhne ko Ghalib ye khayaal achchha hai

We know the reality of paradise
Ghalib, let's admit, these are comforting lies

~

Aaye hai bekasi-e ishq pe rona Ghalib
Kis ke ghar jaayega sailaab-e bala mere baad

At love's pathetic denouement, Ghalib, let tears flow
After me, to whose house will this malefic storm go?

~

Ishq ne Ghalib nikamma kar diya
Varna hum bhi aadmi the kaam ke

Indeed, Ghalib, love has laid me low
Else I was quite a useful fellow!

~

Dekha Asad ko khilwat-o jalwat meiN baar-ha
Deewana gar nahiN hai to hushiyaar bhi nahiN

Public or private, I've seen Asad in every light
Though not totally crazy, he surely isn't that bright

~

Kuch to padhiye ke log kahte haiN
Aaj Ghalib ghazal-saraa na hua

Declaim something, for I’ve heard people say
Ghalib won’t perform his ghazal today.

5

Matley

Na tha kuch to khuda tha kuch na hota to khuda hota
Duboya mujh ko hone ne na hota maiN to kya hota

When there was nothing, there was god
Had there been nothing, god would be
The act of being was my undoing
What would have been had there been no me?

~

Ishrat-e qatra hai darya meiN fana ho jaana
Dard ka had se guzarna hai dava ho jaana

When the lonesome drop falls into the sea
It finally is consummated
When pain crosses a threshold
The sufferer feels medicated

~

Muddat hui hai yaar ko mehmaaN kiye hue
Josh-e qadah se bazm chiraaghaaN kiye hue

It’s been a while my friend, do accept my invite
With the tumult of wine let us brighten tonight

~

Aaina kyon na dooN ke tamaasha kaheN jise
Aisa kahaaN se laaooN ke tujh sa kaheN jise

If you seek your equal, I must offer a looking glass
Where else can I offer someone equal to you in class?

~

Dard minnat-kash-e dava na hua
Main na achchha hua bura na hua

My ache did not seek redress
I neither healed, nor sickened

~

Hai bus ke har ek un ke ishaare meiN nihaaN aur
Karte haiN mohabbat to guzarta hai gumaaN aur

In his every signal lie hints of another motivation
Thus, when he declaims his love, there's bound to be suspicion

~

Vo firaaq aur vo visaal kahaaN
Vo shab-o roz-o maah-o saal kahaaN

Where is that separation and that union?
Where are those nights and days and months and years?

[Alternative:
With you my dear
Time has a new dimension
Separation and union
Stand for night, day, month, year]

~

Dil hi to hai na sang-o khisht dard se bhar na aaye kyoN
Royenge hum hazaar baar koi hameN sataaye kyoN

After all, it is a heart, not a stone or brick, how won't it fill with pain?
I'll cry a thousand times, why should someone rain torment on me?

~

Kya tang hum sitam-zadagaaN ka jahaan hai
Jis meiN ke aik baiza-e mor aasmaan hai

How limited is the world of us, the oppressed
Where our heaven is as big as an ant’s egg![1]

~

Koi din gar zindagaani aur hai
Apne jee meiN hum ne thaani aur hai

Though we have but a few days to live awhile
I have resolved to live it in a new style.

6

Ghazaliyaat

(1)

LAAZIM THA KE DEKHO

Laazim tha ke dekho mera rasta koi din aur
Tanha gaye kyoN, ab raho tanha koi din aur

Mit jaayega sar gar tera patthar na ghisega
HooN dar pe tere naasiya-farsa koi din aur

Aaye ho kal aur aaj hi kahte ho ki jaaooN
Maana ke hamesha nahiN, achchha koi din aur

Jaate hue kahte ho qayaamat ko milenge
Kya khoob qayaamat ka hai goya koi din aur

HaaN ai falak-e-peer javaaN tha abhi Arif
Kya tera bigadta jo na marta koi din aur

LAMENT FOR ARIF[1]

Appropriate it would be, had you waited for me some more
Why did you depart alone? Now stay solitary some more

May either be destroyed first, my head or your tombstone
Thus I rub my forehead at your grave, melancholy some more

You came but yesterday, and now abruptly take your leave?
I know you won't stay forever, but do tarry some more

As you go, you seem to say 'let's meet on Judgment Day'
Today's that doomsday, I needn't wait hopefully some more

Did you not see, O ancient sky, Arif was but a youth?

What would you've lost had he died later, stayed with me some more?

Tum maah-e shab-e chaar-dahum the mere ghar ke
Phir kyoN na raha ghar ka vo naqsha koi din aur

Tum kaun se the aise khare daad-o sitad ke
Karta malak-ul maut taqaaza koi din aur

NaadaaN ho jo kahte ho ki kyoN jeete haiN Ghalib?
Qismat meiN hai marne ki tamanna koi din aur.

You had brightened my house like the moon of the fourteenth night[2]
And now you ask why my house languishes darkly some more?

O angel of death! Why were you such a strict bookkeeper?
Could you not have waited to settle my liability some more?

Foolish are those who ask, 'why do you keep living, Ghalib?'
It is my destiny to grieve despondently some more.

(2)

AAH KO CHAAHIYE

Aah ko chaahiye ek umr asar hone tak
Kaun jeeta hai teri zulf ke sar hone tak?

Daam-e har mauj meiN hai halqaa-e sadkaam-e nahang
DekheN kya guzre hai qatre pe gohar hone tak

Aashiqi sabr-talab aur tamanna betaab
Dil ka kya rang karooN khoon-e jigar hone tak

Hum ne maana ke taghaaful na karoge lekin
Khaak ho jaayenge hum tum ko khabar hone tak

Partav-e khur se hai shabnam ko fana ki taaleem
MaiN bhi hooN ek inaayat ki nazar hone tak

Ek nazar besh nahiN fursat-e hasti ghaafil
Garmi-e bazm hai ek raqs-e sharar hone tak

Gham-e hasti ka Asad kis se ho juz marg ilaaj
Shama har rang meiN jalti hai sahar hone tak.

A CRY NEEDS

For a cry to lead to redress, it often takes an age
Who can remain alive while you with your stray curls engage?

Each wave of the ocean harbours a hundred crocodiles
What lies in store before the drop achieves a pearly stage?[3]

Love counsels patience while desire betrays its anxiety
How should I colour my heart, while these dual passions rage?

I know that you won't shrink from familiarity but
Before you hear of my sad plight, I would have died off-stage

The new sunbeam announces imminent death to dewdrops
I too await the gaze that will both kill and assuage

A mere glance is sufficient for you to complete your task
A spark needs but a moment to kindle a fire's rage

What is the cure for life's sorrow save death, my dear Asad?
The taper burns all night, awaits the dawn to be upstaged.

(3)

BAS KE DUSHWAAR HAI

Bas ke dushwaar hai har kaam ka aasaaN hona
Aadmi ko bhi mayassar nahiN insaaN hona

Ishrat-e qatlgah-e ahl-e tamanna mat poochh
Eed-e nazzaara hai shamsheer ka uriyaaN hona

Ki mere qatl ke baad us ne jafa se tauba
Haai us zood-pashemaaN ka pashemaaN hona

Haif us chaar-girah kapde ki qismat Ghalib
Jis ki qismat meiN ho aashiq ka garebaaN hona.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

It's impossible for all tasks to be facile, that's all
People find it so tough to answer humanity's call

Measure not the desire for death in the passionate
The sight of the killer's sword presages the festival[4]

After killing me, my tormentor forswore all murder
That swift repenter was contrite and rueful, I recall[5]

Spare a thought for the ill-fated four measures of cloth that
Were destined to become a lover's shirt, tunic or shawl.[6]

(4)

SAB KAHAAN? KUCHH

Sab kahaaN, kuch laala-o-gul meiN numaayaaN ho gaeeN
Khaak meiN kyaa soorateiN hongeeN ke pinhaaN ho gaeeN

Yaad thi hum ko bhi rang-a-rang bazm-aaraaiyaaN
Lekin ab naqsh-o nigaar-e taaq-e nisyaaN ho gaeeN

Thi banaatun-naash-e gardooN din ko parde mein nihaaN
Shab ko un ke jee meiN kya aaya ki uriyaaN ho gaeeN

Joo-e khooN aankhoN se bahne do, ke hai shaam-e firaaq
MaiN ye samjhoonga ke sham'eN do farozaaN ho gaeeN

Neend uski hai, dimaagh uska hai, raateiN uski hain
Teri zulfeN jiske baazoo par pareshaaN ho gaeeN

Main chaman mein kya gaya, goya dabistan khul gaya
BulbuleN sun kar mere naale ghazal-khwaaN ho gaeeN

NOT ALL, MERELY A FEW

Not all, merely a few were celebrated in tulips and roses
What faces there must have been, which remain hidden in dust!

I remembered for a long time those colourful decorations
But now they are consigned to the shelf of forgotten memories

The starry beauties of the constellation stayed hidden in the mist of the day
At night, wonder what came over them, they revealed themselves, disrobed[7]

Blood flows from my eyes; let it, for it's the night of separation
I will think that two candles that were thus lit

Sleep, and wisdom, and the nights all belong to that one
On whose shoulder you choose to rest, with your tresses scattered

As I entered the garden, it was like school had commenced
The nightingales became poets, when they heard me declaim[8]

Hum muvahhid hain, hamaara kaish hai tark-e rusoom
MillateiN jab mit gaeeN ajzaa-e eemaaN ho gaeeN

Ranj se khoogar hua insaaN to mit jaata hai ranj
MushkileN mujh par padi itni ke aasaaN ho gaeeN

Yoon hi gar rota raha Ghalib to ai ahl-e jahaaN
Dekhna in bastiyoN ko tum ke veeraaN ho gaeeN.

I believe in the oneness of god, the disavowal of rituals is my creed
For when religions fade away, they will become part of true faith

When one makes friends with grief, it miraculously disappears
I faced so many privations, that they eventually became facile

If Ghalib keeps up his lament, mark my words, O people
These neighbourhoods of yours will turn into wilderness.

(5)

HAZAARON KHWAAHISHEIN AISI

HazaaroN khwaahisheiN aisi ke har khwaahish pe dam nikle
Bahut nikle mere armaan, lekin phir bhi kam nikle

Dare kyoN mera qaatil kya rahega us ki gardan par
Vo kyoN jo chashm-e tar se umr bhar yooN dam-ba-dam nikle

Nikalna khuld se Aadam ka sunte aaye haiN lekin
Bahut be-aabroo ho kar tere kooche se hum nikle

Bharam khul jaaye zaalim teri qaamat ki daraazi ka
Agar us turra-e pur-pech-o-kham ka pech-o-kham nikle

Magar likhvaaye koi us ko khat to hum se likhvaaye
Hui subh aur ghar se kaan par rakh kar qalam nikle

Hui is daur meiN mansoob mujh se baada-aashaami

Phir aaya vo zamaana jo jahaan mein jaam-e-jam nikle

Hui jin se tawaqqo khastagi ki daad paane ki
Vo ham se bhi ziyaada khasta-e tegh-e sitam nikle

THOUSANDS OF DESIRES

Thousands of desires, and each one worth dying for
Many of my desires were fulfilled, but yet, I feel unrequited

Why should my killer worry, no blame need accrue for my blood
That which flowed from my neck would have ebbed from my eyes

We have heard often of the expulsion of Adam from Eden
But that is nothing compared to my shamed exit from your street

The secret of your tall stature would be out, my tyrant
Should the twists and turns of your tresses be unfurled[9]

If anyone wishes to write my love a letter, then I am available
Every morning, I set out, with a pen tucked behind my ear[10]

In this age it is I who has become associated with inebriation
Through me has emerged a second age of Jamshed[11]

The one whose solace I sought for my wounded self
Turned out to be wounded worse by the sword of tyranny

Mohabbat mein nahiN hai farq jeene aur marne ka
Usi ko dekh kar jeete haiN jis kaafir pe dam nikle

Khuda ke vaaste parda na Kaabe se uthaa, zaalimKahin aisa na ho yaaN bhi vahi kaafir sanam nikle

KahaaN maikhaane ka darvaza Ghalib aur kahaaN vaaiz
Par itnaa jaante haiN kal vo jaata thha, ke hum nikle.

In love, there is no difference between living and dying
For I find my will live by gazing at the infidel who kills me[12]

For god’s sake, keep the black cloth on the Kaaba
I do not want to find that it harbours yet another infidel idol[13]

Whither the tavern door, Ghalib, and whither the holy man?

But I swear, as I left the tavern last night, I saw him enter.

(6)

BAAZEECHA-E ATFAAL

Baazeecha-e atfaal hai duniya mere aage
Hota hai shab-o-roz tamaasha mere aage

Hota hai nihaaN gard mein sahra mere hote
Ghista hai jabeeN khaak pe dariya mere aage

Mat poochh ke kya haal hai mera tere peechhe
Tu dekh ke kya rang hai tera mere aage

EemaaN mujhe roke hai jo khenche hai mujhe kufr
Kaaba mere peechhe hai, kaleesa mere aage

Go haath ko jumbish nahiN aankhoN mein to dam hai
Rehne do abhi saaghar-o-meena mere aage

Hum-pesha o hum-mashrab o humraaz hai mera
Ghalib ko bura kyoN kaho achha mere aage.

THE PLAY OF CHILDREN

The world to me is no more than a play of children
This cheap spectacle occurs every day in front of me

(My wandering raises it and) the desert is hidden by dust
(For the volume of my tears) the sea bows in front of me[14]

Ask not how I am coping with life in your absence
Instead, watch your face change colour in front of me[15]

Faith compels me to stop, while infidelity pulls me forward
I vacillate thus, the Kaaba behind and the church in front of me

Admittedly, my hands have ceased to move, but my eyes still have strength
Keep the cask and the wine glass in front of me[16]

He shares my profession, my wine, and also my secrets
And you dare denounce Ghalib in front of me!

(7)

YE NA THI HAMAARI QISMAT

Ye na thi hamaari qismat ke visaal-e-yaar hota
Agar aur jeete rehte yahi intezaar hota

Tere vaade par jiye hum to ye jaan jhoot jaana
Ke khushi se mar na jaate agar aetbaar hota

Koi mere dil se poochhe tere teer-e neem-kash ko
Ye khalish kahaaN se hoti jo jigar ke paar hota

Ye kahaaN ki dosti hai ki bane haiN dost naaseh
Koi chaarasaaz hota koi gham-gusaar hota

Gham agarche jaaN-gusil hai pa kahaaN bacheN ke dil hai
Gham-e ishq gar na hota gham-e rozgaar hota

KahooN kis se maiN ke kya hai shab-e gham buri bala hai
Mujhe kya bura tha marna agar ek baar hota

Hue mar ke hum jo rusva hue kyon na gharq-e dariya
Na kabhi janaaza uthta na kahiN mazaar hota

Ye masaail-e tasavvuf ye tera bayaan Ghalib
Tujhe hum vali samajhte jo na baada-khvaar hota.

IT WAS NOT MY FATE

To be united with my love was not to be my fate
Had I lived longer, I would still be pining in wait

You promised and yet I lived, know I knew you had lied
Else I would have died by now, my joy would be so great

Someone should ask my heart about your poorly shot arrow
Would it have hurt so much if that dart had pierced me straight?

What sort of friendship is this that just warns and admonishes?
I would have preferred a healer, I would prefer a mate

Pain and alienation stalk us so, how can the heart escape?
If the pain of love did not hurt, labour would alienate

With whom can I share my burdens, the night of grief is long
I would welcome death, if just once I had to bear its weight

Even dying brings dishonour, why couldn't I drown at sea?
No funeral would be needed, no grave we would create

These Sufi thoughts and that silver tongue, my dear Ghalib
Were you not a lush, we'd call you a saint and celebrate.

(8)

ZIKR US PARI-VASH KA

Zikr us pari-vash ka aur phir bayaaN apna
Ban gaya raqeeb aakhir tha jo raaz-daaN apna

Mai vo kyoN bahut peete bazm-e-ghair meiN ya Rab
Aaj hi hua manzoor un ko imtihaaN apna

Manzar ek bulandi par aur ham bana sakte
Arsh se udhar hota kaash ke makaaN apna

Dard-e dil likhooN kab tak jaaooN un ko dikhla dooN
UngliyaaN figaar apni khaama khooN-chakaaN apna

Hum kahaaN ke daana the kis hunar meiN yakta the
Be-sabab hua Ghalib dushman aasmaaN apna.

THE TALE OF THAT BEAUTY

The tale of that beauty, and on top of that, my locution
Alas my secret sharer turned into my competition!

My love prefers to get drunk with others, his mood to lighten
Just today, when not with me, do his emotions heighten[17]

We could have viewed a heavenly vista from on high
Had our house been built loftier than the sky![18]

Should I write of my heartache, perhaps it is enough to show
My pen splattered with blood, wounded fingers that fed the flow

Neither was he accomplished nor did he with wisdom glow
For no reason, the tyrant world treated Ghalib like a foe.

(9)

KISI KO DE KE DIL

Kisi ko de ke dil koi nava-sanj-e fughaaN kyoN ho
Na ho jab dil hi seene meiN to phir moonh meiN zabaaN kyoN ho

Kiya gham-khvaar ne rusva lage aag is mohabbat ko
Na laave taab jo gham ki vo mera raazdaaN kyoN ho

Vafa kaisi kahaaN ka ishq jab sar phodna thahra
To phir ai sang-dil tera hi sang-e aastaaN kyoN ho

Qafas meiN mujh se roodaad-e chaman kahte na dar humdum
Giri hai jis pe kal bijli vo mera aashiyaaN kyoN ho

Ye keh sakte ho hum dil meiN nahiN haiN par ye batlaao
Ke jab dil meiN tumheeN tum ho to aakhoN se nihaaN kyoN ho

Yahi hai aazmaana to sataana kis ko kehte haiN
Adoo ke ho liye jab tum to mera imtihaaN kyoN ho

Nikaala chaahta hai kaam kya taanoN se tu Ghalib
Tere be-mehr kehne se vo tujh par mehrbaaN kyoN ho.

AFTER GIVING YOUR HEART TO SOMEONE

After giving your heart to someone, it does not behoove one to lament
When the heart has exited the chest, why does the tongue still move?

I was betrayed by a so-called sympathizer, may this love burn down!
Why did the one who could not keep my secrets become my confidante?

What faith? Whence passion? If I’m destined to break my head
Then, O stone-hearted one, why did it have to be at your doorstep?

Caged I may be, but do not censor news of the garden
If lightning had to fall on an abode, why did it have to be mine?

You may say I am not in your heart, but do let me know why
If my heart harbours naught but you, why are you hidden from the eye?

If this is a trial for me, then pray what is oppression?
You fell in love with my enemy, why is that a test of my forbearance?

If you seek to get things done through taunts, then O Ghalib
Why will calling someone cruel make them fall in love with you?

(10)

ISHQ MUJH KO NAHIN

Ishq mujh ko nahiN vahshat hi sahi
Meri vahshat teri shohrat hi sahi

Qat'a keeje na ta'alluq hum se
Kuch nahiN hai to adaavat hi sahi

Mere hone meiN hai kya rusvaai
Ai vo majlis nahiN khalvat hi sahi

Hum bhi dushman to nahiN haiN apne
Ghair ko tujh se mohabbat hi sahi

Apni hasti hi se ho jo kuch ho
Aagahi gar nahiN ghaflat hi sahi

Umr har-chand ki hai barq-e khiraam
Dil ke khooN karne ki fursat hi sahi

Hum koi tark-e vafa karte haiN
Na sahi ishq museebat hi sahi

Kuchh to de ai falak-e na-insaaf
Aah-o faryaad ki rukhsat hi sahi

Yaar se chhed chali jaaye Asad
Gar nahiN vasl to hasrat hi sahi.

BE IT NOT LOVE

I'm not in love, I'm mad, so be it
My madness is your fame, so be it

Break not contact with me
If enmity is all you can offer, so be it

Why would my presence disgrace you?
Meet me in private, not in public, so be it

I do not hate myself for sure[19]
My rival loves you, so be it

My essence derives from my existence
If not self-awareness, then self-denial, so be it[20]

Though life is brief and lightning-paced
I still have time to turn my heart to blood, so be it[21]

I never shirk from the demands of faith
Be it not love but a torment, so be it

At least grant me some time, O unjust sky
A brief while just to wail and cry, so be it

Keep up the flirtation with your beloved, Asad
Be it not union but mere longing, so be it.

(11)

KOI UMEED BAR NAHIN AATI

Koi ummeed bar nahiN aati
Koi soorat nazar nahiN aati

Maut ka ek din muayyan hai
Neend kyoN raat bhar nahiN aati

Aage aati thi haal-e dil pe hansi
Ab kisi baat par nahiN aati

Jaanta hooN savaab-e taa'at-o zohd
Par tabiyat idhar nahiN aati

Hai kuchh aisi hi baat jo chup hooN
Varna kya baat kar nahiN aati

KyoN na cheekhooN ke yaad karte haiN
Meri aawaaz gar nahiN aati

Hum vahaaN haiN jahaaN se hum ko bhi
Kuch hamaari khabar nahiN aati

Marte haiN aarzoo meiN marne ki

Maut aati hai par nahiN aati

Kaaba kis moonh se jaaoge Ghalib
Sharm tum ko magar nahiN aati.

NO HOPE IS CONSUMMATED

Hopelessness remains my condition
No recourse remains on the horizon

Death is predestined for a day
Why then does sleep elude you all night?

Earlier my situation made me laugh
Now I am left totally mirthless

I know the rewards of obedience and prayer
But my nature just does not point me there

It must be something that makes me hold my tongue
Do not think for a moment that I am dumbstruck

I must cry, for if I go silent, my lover wonders
‘What’s wrong, why hasn’t he wept yet?’

I am at that place where I am reduced
To seek news from others about myself

I die in my desire for death
But death, while imminent, eludes me

Making a pilgrimage, Ghalib?
What face will you show at the Kaaba?
Yet, you persevere, shamelessly.

(12)

DIL-E NAADAAN

Dil-e naadaaN tujhe hua kya hai
Aakhir is dard ki dava kya hai

Hum haiN mushtaaq aur vo bezaar
Ya ilaahi ye maajra kya hai

MaiN bhi moonh meiN zabaan rakhta hooN
Kaash poochho ke mudda'aa kya hai

Jab ke tujh bin nahiN koi maujood
Phir ye hungaama ai khuda kya hai

Sabza-o gul kahaaN se aaye haiN
Abr kya cheez hai hava kya hai

Hum ko un se vafa ki hai ummeed
Jo nahiN jaante vafa kya hai

Jaan tum par nisaar karta hooN
MaiN nahiN jaanta dua kya hai

MaiN ne maana ke kuch nahiN Ghalib
Muft haath aaye to bura kya hai.

INNOCENT HEART

Innocent heart, what should I make of thee?
Is there a cure for your disability?

I'm supplicant; yet my love is irked
O god, what is this quandary?

I too harbour a tongue in my mouth
What is my desire? Ask directly

When without you nothing does exist
Why this brouhaha, O lord, verily?

Wherefrom did this vegetation sprout?
What's a cloud, how do winds blow merrily?

Alas, I seek allegiance from one who
Knows not the meaning of loyalty

I will sacrifice my life for you
Empty prayers? They are not for me

I admit that Ghalib is worth nothing
But how bad can it be if he's obtained free?

APPENDIX 1

The Navratan: Nine of Ghalib's Poet Contemporaries

To underscore the beauty of Urdu poetry in Ghalib's time, I have chosen to profile nine of his contemporaries briefly, as if to provide a bejewelled setting for the Kohinoor. One can quibble at my choice, but it can be said without doubt that these nine poets, all of whom overlapped Ghalib's life, provide a poetic context to the time and remind us how great of a poet he must have been to rise in stature above such giants. I present them in order of their birth and translate short selected verses of their work.

1. Mir: Despite the presence of a veritable pantheon of stalwarts of Urdu poetry, it was Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810) who came to be known as the Khuda-e Sukhan (God of Poetry). That perhaps is a reflection of his status as a trailblazer. Poets who came after Mir reproduced his rhyme schemes or riffed off them. Mir, however, demonstrated an originality that was not beholden to an earlier tradition.

   Some of Mir's life mimics Ghalib's. A penurious childhood rendered doubly vulnerable by the early death of his father, cruelty at the hands of relatives, a move to Delhi to better his circumstances, and bitter memories of a variety of slights. He eventually moved to Lucknow, but did not flower there as a poet, finding the lifestyle of Awadh too libertine for his taste. He moved back to Delhi, where he eventually got his due as a poet and rubbed that in the face of his rivals with many a poetic boast. Mir

was one of the first of Urdu poets who wrote an autobiography (albeit in Farsi), titled *Zikr-e Mir* (Discussing Mir), perhaps punning on his name, which meant ‘leader’. Much of his poetry affected a lugubrious mien, and he was fond of asides at religious orthodoxy. No wonder Ghalib loved him so.

The ghazal whose three verses I have chosen to translate is one of Mir’s more famous ones. It has an air of foreboding about it, perhaps remembering the brutal fate of kings in his time.

Jis sar ko ghuroor aaj hai yaaN taaj-vari ka
Kal us pe yahiN shor hai phir nauhagari ka

Le saans bhi ahista ke naazuk hai bahut kaam
Aafaaq ke is kaargah-e-sheeshagari ka

Tuk Mir-e jigar-sokhta ki jald khabar le
Kya yaar bharosa hai charaagh-e sahari ka

The head that feels so vain now that it wears a kingly crown
The proud tale of its life will soon in mournful wailing drown

Draw your breath with the utmost care, the task is delicate
Lest these brittle creations, as fragile as glass, break down

Spare a thought for heartbroken Mir, do inquire about him
He is a lamp that weakly burns, and may not last till dawn

2. Nazeer: Nazeer Akbarabadi (1735–1830) was a teacher who is reputed to have given Ghalib a few lessons in his childhood. Nazeer spent his life in Agra (which was also known as Akbarabad in those days) and perhaps was insulated from the isomorphic pulls of the Delhi and Lucknow schools, which gave his poetry a je ne sais quoi uniqueness. He wrote songs full of sharply etched imagery that had marvellous visual effects. Unlike the philosophical tracts of some of his contemporaries, his quotidian rhymes were populated by ordinary folk and his ballads abounded with interesting observations about human nature that were set to highly sing-able rhythms. Traders, courtesans, drug addicts and

hypocrites, all found mention in his verses, which were constructed in a playful mien at odds with the classical poetry of the time. When the high-minded critics of that age such as Azad and Hali wrote their literary histories, they omitted Nazeer altogether. But time would prove to be his ally; his poems are still sung and employed in contemporary literature. His work offered the possibility of an alternative mode of poetry that in time, informed the realist poets of a later era. The noted theatre artist Habib Tanvir based his famous 1954 play *Agra Bazar* on Nazeer's life.

Many of Nazeer's poems were constructed in the *mukhammas* style, involving a nazm with a five-line scheme, usually with four rhyming lines and a common refrain. I have chosen to translate a single verse from his most famous poem, *Banjara Naama* (The Gypsy's Song). The banjara here stands for everything that is ephemeral, and will pass.

Kuch kaam na aavega tere ye laal zamurrud seem-o zar
Jab poonji baat meiN bikhregi phir aan banegi jaaN oopar
Naqqaare naubat baan nishaaN daulat hishmat faujeN lashkar
Kya masnad takiya milk makaaN kya chauki kursi takht chakar
Sab thaath pada rah jaayega jab laad chalega banjaara

Nothing will help you finally, ruby nor emerald, silver nor gold
The wealth that you had stored with care, you'll see it has on the road rolled
The drums that drummed your worth, your name, the armies you had in your fold
Your throne, your palace, property, your crown, all gone, it is foretold
Your grandeur will be rendered useless, when the gypsy caravan moves on

3. Insha: Insha Allah Khan Insha (1757–1818) straddled the boundaries between Hindi and Urdu like few others. His poems, such as *Rani Ketki ki Kahani*, are read as much in the Nastaliq script as in the Devanagri. He is also credited with the first book that formalized the rules of Urdu grammar, titled *Darya-e-*

Lataafat (Sea of Elegance). In the contemporary atmosphere where we are increasingly conditioned to see Urdu and Hindi as distinct languages, Insha's work shatters those boundaries, instead showing Urdu as an arena for a mixing of Sanskrit and Persian. The effect is not only wonderful for our times but also suggests that it was rather unremarkable in Insha's. Unfortunately, Insha's life also symbolized the uncertain fate of the poet in an era where the earlier structures of patronage were fast attenuating or disappearing altogether. He fell on hard times, became a pauper and watched helplessly as a son succumbed to illness, yet again mirroring some aspects of Ghalib's life. His best poems from his later years are masterful expressions of ineffable suffering.

Insha often does not get enough due, and by way of compensation, I have chosen to translate a full ghazal.

Mujhe kyoN na aave saaqi nazar aaftaab ulta
Ke pada hai aaj khum mein qadah-e sharaab ulta

Chale the haram ko rah meiN hue ik sanam se aashiq
Na hua sawaab haasil ye liya azaab ulta

Ajab ulte mulk ke haiN aji aap bhi ke tum se
Kabhi baat ki jo seedhi to mila jawaab ulta

Ye shab-e guzishta dekha wo qafa se kuch haiN goya
KahiN Haq kare ke hove ye hamaara khwaab ulta

Abhi jhad laga de baarish koi mast bhar ke naara
Jo zameeN pe phenk maare qadah-e sharaab ulta

Hue vaade par jo jhoote to nahiN mile haiN tevar
E-lo aur bhi tamaasha ye suno hijaab ulta

Ghazal aur qaafiyoN meiN na kahe so kyonkar Insha
Ke hawa ne khud ba khud aa waraq-e kitaab ulta

My dear cupbearer, I do see the sun topsy-turvy
For in the wine jar, my glass has fallen topsy-turvy

On the way to the mosque, I fell in love with an idol
Curses instead of blessings, came undone topsy-turvy

What strange land have you come from, I wonder, for when I ask
Straight questions, with crooked answers you run topsy-turvy

My memory of last night was your displeasure with me
May god decree my dreamy web was spun topsy-turvy

Should I throw down my goblet with an exultant holler
We will find that the monsoon has begun topsy-turvy

Her promise she did not keep and now does not meet my gaze
What nonsense! I am aggrieved, also shunned, topsy-turvy

The winds have turned the pages on poetic tradition
Perhaps 'Insha' with new rhymes should now run topsy-turvy

4. Anees: I have made the perhaps contentious claim earlier that Mir Babar Ali Anees (1803–74) may be one of the best Urdu poets that ever lived. To those who have studied his work, however, this may not be as controversial an assertion. First of all, his output was prodigious. A brief calculation suggests that Anees wrote over 200 lines of poetry for every day of his life. This is even more interesting because Anees restricted the subject matter of his poetry to a narrow slice of Islamic history, essentially describing the events of Karbala, where the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Husain, faced off against the Umayyad king Yazeed's army and was martyred on the tenth of Muharram, 61 AH (680 CE). Anees popularized the marsiya tradition of poetry, which was an elegy, but also an epic poem. The format essentially consisted of six-line verses, where the first four lines rhyme, as do the next two, in a bahr that is followed throughout the poem. A typical marsiya contains between 100 and 150 six-line stanzas. Consider this stanza:

Husain jab ke chale baad-e dopahar ran ko
Na tha koi ke jo thaame rakaab-e tausan ko

Sakina jhaad rahi thi aba ke daaman ko
Husain chup ke khade the jhukaaye gardan ko
Na aasra thha koi shaah-e karbalaai ko
Faqat savaar kiya tha bahan ne bhai ko

That fateful afternoon, ready to fight, stood brave Husain
No one to help him mount his horse, loneliness fed his pain
Little Sakina brushed his robe, her sadness to contain
Husain simply stood with head bowed, and quietude did reign
Karbala's hero was alone, no friends left to pay heed
His brave sister then stepped up, to help him mount his steed

5. Dabeer: Mirza Salaamat Ali Dabeer (1804–75) was Anees's contemporary, and the two had a healthy rivalry. Each one had a series of acolytes, named 'Aneesiye' and 'Dabeeriye', who debated one another on the relative superiority of their masters. From those encounters, narrated in gleeful detail by Azad in his book *Aab-e Hayaat*, we discern that Dabeer was known as a better craftsman, with a greater command of Arabic, while Anees was better known for his simpler, direct rhythms. Overall, Anees was more popular, and has been better regarded since, but this is a matter of slight differences.

   To underscore his command over the language, Dabeer composed a benuqta marsiya, a perfectly rhyming elegy of over 700 lines that did not use a single letter with a dot. The English equivalent would perhaps be to write without using around eight consonants and two vowels! Interestingly, he had to choose a different takhallus, for the word 'dabeer' includes a letter (b) that has a dot. Dabeer's choice of takhallus was 'Atarid', which means mercury.

   To showcase Dabeer's work, I have translated a verse from a marsiya he composed on the chehlum (fortieth day after death) of Imam Husain. The story goes that a year after the death of Husain and his companions, his family returned to Karbala on his chehlum after a protracted imprisonment and visited the graves of their loved ones for the first time. Their lamentations at that

moment are recorded in this marsiya, which transports the listeners to the desert plain of Karbala through its evocative verses.

Misl-e charaagh gor-e ghareebaN pe dil jalaaye
PhooloN ke badle qabroN pe lakht-e jigar chadhaaye
PyaaroN ki bood-o baash ke saamaaN jo yaad aaye
Be-saakhta pukaare kaleje pakad ke haaye
Hai hai vo parda-daar hamaare kidhar gaye
Be-parda ho ke aal-e Nabi dar-ba-dar gaye

At the burial ground they had no lamps, so burned their hearts instead
On the graves, lacking fresh flowers, pieces of their souls they spread
As they recalled those who they'd brought to life, but now were dead
Uncontrollable was their grief, such piteous tears were shed
'Alas where are those gallant ones who kept our honour true?
We were dishonoured and publicly displayed after you'

6. Zafar: Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862) the king has made a few appearances in this book; I wish to confine this brief introduction to Bahadur Shah Zafar the poet. Zafar was believed to have come from a lineage of poets, his father and grandfathers also having composed many a ghazal. That is of course another way of saying he came from a lineage of kings. Monarchs had a way of hiring well-known poets and then magically emerging in public with high-quality poetic output of their own. But by all accounts, Zafar seems to have been a true-blue poet himself, considering the enthusiasm with which he participated in mushairas and put forward his own work for evaluation. Moreover, he continued to write well after he was dethroned and incarcerated, including this poignant summary of the fate of his beloved city.

Na ghar hai, na dar hai, bacha ek Zafar hai
Faqat haal-e Dilli sunaane ki qaatir

No house nor portal, we stay and we suffer
The sad tale of Delhi, narrated by Zafar

Some of his best work was written in Rangoon, where he spent his exile. One such ghazal is translated below and gives eloquent voice to his distress, reflecting his realization that he would not even be buried in his beloved Delhi.

Lagta nahiN hai jee mera ujde dayaar meiN
Kis ki bani hai aalam-e na-paayedaar meiN

Keh do in hasratoN se kahiN aur jaa baseN
Itni jagah kahaaN hai dil-e daagh-daar meiN

Umr-e daraaz maang ke laaye the chaar din
Do arzoo meiN kat gaye do intezaar meiN

Kitna hai bad-naseeb 'Zafar' dafn ke liye
Do gaz zameen bhi na mili koo-e yaar meiN

In this deserted ruined space, uneasiness is great
To find peace in this transient world was not to be my fate

Tell my yearnings and desires to go and live elsewhere
My heart alas, is full of wounds, hardly the best estate

Asked I for a wholesome life, but was granted four mere days
Two I spent pining and yearning, two I lingered in wait

How unfortunate was Zafar that in death he was denied
Two yards of earth for his grave in the lane of his soulmate

7. Zauq: Ibrahim Khan Zauq (1789–1854) was Zafar's tutor, his poet laureate and his favourite, and therefore, Ghalib's bête noire. Ghalib considered Zauq his inferior and was especially incensed that Zauq got to close out mushairas. They competed in style, with poetic repartee, but truth be told, Ghalib had the better of the exchanges. Mozart always outdoes Salieri.

   His contretemps with Ghalib apart, Zauq was a remarkable person. He overcame very modest beginnings and a near-fatal bout with smallpox to become a self-taught poet. He made his way to the Mughal court as a lower poet and caught the fancy of a prince named Mirza Sirajuddin Muhammad. The prince appointed the

nineteen-year-old Zauq as his tutor for a small salary. Luckily for Zauq, the prince would ascend the Mughal throne and assume the title of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Thus, he became the poet laureate, a position he held till his death. Ghalib may have had his insults, but he never had Zauq's position as long as the latter lived.

Unfortunately, much of the large corpus of Zauq's work was lost in the conflagration of 1857. Enough survives, however, to give us a flavour of the master. Consider a few verses of one of his more famous ghazals.

Laayi hayaat aaye qaza le chali chale
Apni khushi na aaye na apni khushi chale

Ho umr-e Khizr bhi to kahenge ba waqt-e marg
Ham kya rahe yahaaN? Abhi aaye abhi chale

Jaate hava-e shauq meiN haiN is chaman se 'Zauq'
Apni bala se baad-e saba ab kahiN chale

Life summoned me, I ascended; death guided my descent
Neither of my will did I come, nor of my will I went

Were we to be granted the age of Khizr,[1] we would still
Say, 'Why leave now? I've just come! My passing, I resent!'

Zauq flows away into the void from this verdant garden
I hardly care what flowers bloom post my mortal event

8. Momin: Momin Khan (1800–51) and Ghalib were contemporaries in Delhi's poetry scene for over three decades, and like Mir before him, Momin was fortunate enough to be bestowed with Ghalib's praise. In an extraordinary paean, Ghalib reportedly declared that he would trade his entire divaan for a single sher by his contemporary, one that went, *tum mere paas hote ho goya; jab koi doosra nahiN hota* (it is as if you are close to me; when there is nobody else around). Hyperbole apart, this is a measure of great respect.

Momin's verses have become the stuff of Urdu metaphor. For example, on the difficulty of changing one's attitude: *umr saari to kati ishq-e butaaN meiN, Momin, aakhri waqt meiN kya khaak musalmaaN honge* (I have spent my life loving idols, Momin; on my deathbed, I am loath to accept Islam). A hakeem by profession, Momin was also a student of geomancy (astrological mathematics), music and chess.

Three verses from one of Momin's best-known ghazals should suffice to know that we are in the company of a master:

> *Vo jo hum meiN tum meiN qaraar tha tumhe yaad ho ke na yaad ho*
> *Vahi yaani vaada nibaah ka tumhe yaad ho ke na yaad ho*
>
> *Vo naye gile vo shikaayateN vo maze ki hikaayateN*
> *Vo har ek baat pe roothna tumhe yaad ho ke na yaad ho*
>
> *Jise aap ginte the aashnaa jise aap kehte the baavafaa*
> *Main vahi hooN Momin-e mubtala tumhe yaad ho ke na yaad ho*
>
> That easy familiarity between us, you may perhaps remember
> Those days we made those promises, you may perhaps remember
>
> Your reproach at matters minor, those gripes that made you a whiner
> At every moment, your feigned distress, you may perhaps remember
>
> The one you found forever trustworthy, the one you counted a friend
> I remain that Momin, I do profess, you may perhaps remember

9. Dagh: Dagh Dehlvi (1831–1905) was a junior contemporary of Ghalib's, and after the crisis of 1857, made his way to Hyderabad. He wrote many of his famous ghazals after he moved south, and his grave near the Yousufain Dargah is still a site of pilgrimage for Hyderabadis. His couplets also have been incorporated into day-to-day usage, such as the first line of his popular sher: *hazrat-e Dagh jahaaN baith gaye, baith gaye; aur honge teri mehfil se ubharne vaale* (where Sir Dagh sits, he stays seated; there may be others who choose to exit your presence). It is often invoked by urdudaans of a certain age when they sit down.

Three verses from a ghazal by Dagh show him to be a master of economy who was as much at ease with the short bahr as Momin was with the long:

Sabaq aisa padha diya tu ne
Dil se sab kuch bhula diya tu ne

Laakh dene ka ek dena hai
Dil-e be-muddua diya tu ne

'Dagh' ko kaun dene waala thha?
Jo diya ai Khuda diya tu ne

Indeed, such a lesson you have taught
All previous knowledge my heart forgot

A gift like a million, you've given
Gave me a heart that no longer sought

Who else will give with such great élan?
Who else but god? That's what Dagh thought.

APPENDIX 2

A Ghalibian Bibliography

This is a book for lay readers, and I have consciously attempted to avoid too many of the trappings of an academic volume, such as references. However, I have consulted many books in the course of writing this one and offer this bibliographic note with two objectives in mind. First, I wish to acknowledge the debt of those sources that I have consulted and those authors whose wisdom I have relied upon to make this narrative informative. The second is to offer a roadmap to those who might find Ghalib interesting enough to pursue further reading.

The rest of this appendix has five parts. In the first I point towards Ghalib's works in the original. In the second, I highlight a few books that offer translations of Ghalib into English. This list is by no means exhaustive and may even have several egregious omissions; as someone who reads Urdu, I have not consulted as much of Ghalib's work in translation as others may have. The third section identifies and briefly discusses books and articles about Ghalib in Urdu. I have done my best to annotate some of these books for a non-Urdu-speaking audience. The fourth section introduces the reader to books and articles about Ghalib in English. The fifth section discusses some key Internet resources on Ghalib and on Urdu poetry/South Asian literature in general. This final section is perhaps the best starting point for lay readers to venture further into the world of Ghalib.

Kalaam-e Ghalib (Ghalib's Works)

Everyone has heard of the *Divaan-e Ghalib*, which sounds like a single book, but the reality is that Ghalib published five different editions of his Urdu divaan, each a bit different in content than the other, to go with a Farsi one as well. Typically, when we refer to the *Divaan-e Ghalib* nowadays, we are talking about the comprehensive one published by Maulana Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi in 1958. Arshi (1904–81) was a librarian, linguist and scholar from Rampur, and his compiled divaan remains in print, from the Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu (Hind) in New Delhi.

There are other compilations of Ghalib's divaan, such as the one by Professor Hameed Ahmed Khan (1903–74) of Punjab University in Lahore, brought out in 1969 to mark Ghalib's death centenary. Kalidas Gupta Riza (1925–2001), an extraordinary Ghalib scholar, attempted to compile every single verse Ghalib had written and arrange them in chronological order. The resultant book, titled *Divaan-e Ghalib Kamil*, contains 4209 Urdu couplets, many more than are in the Arshi *Divaan*. The book is in print in Pakistan (Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, Karachi) and India (Sakar Publishers, Mumbai).

Ghalib's letters were put together by Dr Khaliq Anjum (1935–2016) in a four-volume set titled *Ghalib ke Khutoot*. The volumes emerged over a period; the last one was published in 1993. They too can be obtained from the Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu (Hind) in New Delhi. This is a comprehensive set; an edited two-volume set titled *Khutoot-e Ghalib* was compiled by Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr (1893–1971) of Lahore in 1969 to mark Ghalib's death centenary.

Ghalib's *Dastambu* (A Fistful of Flowers) was published several times, most recently in 1969 by Abdash Shakoor Ahsan. It is out of print but is available as full text on the Internet.

Tarjumaan-e Ghalib (Ghalib Translated)

Ghalib has been rendered into English by many translators.[1] To begin with the most recent, noted Ghalib scholar Professor Frances Pritchett and Owen Cornwall brought out a selection of his work titled *Ghalib: Selected*

Poems and Letters, published by Columbia University Press (New York) in 2017. Prof. Pritchett's works on Ghalib are discussed later as well.

Translations of Ghalib include K.C. Kanda's *Mirza Ghalib: Selected Lyrics and Letters*, published in 2011 (Sterling Publishers, New Delhi); Azra Raza and Sara Suleri Goodyear's *Ghalib: Epistemologies of Elegance*, published in 2009 (Viking, New York); Sarvat Rahman's comprehensive *Diwân-e-Ghalib*, published in 2003, which contains a 'complete translation into English, including all the ghazals, qaseedas, masnavis, qitas & quatrains of the published Diwan and a selection from the unpublished Diwan' (Ghalib Institute, New Delhi); Sarfaraz Niazi's *Love Sonnets of Ghalib*, published in 2002, another complete translation of the *Divaan* (Ferozsons, Lahore, and subsequently Rupa & Company, New Delhi); Ralph Russell's *The Seeing Eye: Selections from the Urdu and Persian Ghazals of Ghalib* (Oxford University Press, Pakistan, 2000); and others. Earlier translations include a poetic selection edited by Aijaz Ahmad titled *Ghazals of Ghalib* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1971) and C.M. Naim's *Twenty-Five Verses by Ghalib* (Writer's Workshop, Calcutta, 1970). An early comprehensive book on Ghalib was P.L. Lakhanpal's *Ghalib: The Man and His Verse*, published in 1960 by International Press, New Delhi. The book includes interesting biographical data, literary criticism and several translations of Ghalib's work. The earliest example of English writing on Ghalib I found dated back to 1928, with S.A. Latif's *Ghalib: A Critical Appreciation of His Life and Urdu Poetry.*

Ghalib's letters have been translated by several people, including by Pritchett/Cornwall and Kanda, and by Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam in *Ghalib: 1797–1869: Life and Letters* (first published in 1969 and reissued in 1994 by Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi), and Daud Rahbar's 1987 annotated selection titled *Urdu Letters of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib*, published by SUNY Press.

Finally, Ghalib's *Dastambu* was translated in excellent idiomatic English in 1970 by Khwaja Ahmed Faruqi as *Dastanbuy: A Diary of the Indian Revolt of 1857* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay).

Tanqeed-e Ghalib (Literary Evaluations in Urdu)

Ghalib's work has been subjected to several expository editorial analyses, known as 'sharaahs'. These sharaahs provide the editor's understanding of what specific ash'aar may mean and also incorporate annotations, including contextual information, to help the reader get past the words of the verses into a universe of multiple meanings. Far too many sharaahs exist to be listed here, but perhaps the paradigmatic example is Ali Haider 'Nazm' Tabatabai's (1854–1933) *Sharaah-e Divaan-e Urdu-e Ghalib* (An Exposition on the Urdu Divaan of Ghalib), considered by many to be definitive, though highly subjective in its interpretation. Among the modern scholars, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has published *Tafheem-e Ghalib* (Ghalib Explained, Ghalib Institute, New Delhi, 1989), which is a selective and sophisticated analysis of Ghalib's Urdu and Farsi poetry.

Ghalib is arguably the foremost literary figure in Urdu and has been written about in innumerable books, hundreds of doctoral dissertations and several articles in magazines and journals. There are several bibliographic books on Ghalib, and magazines and journals devoted to Ghalib continue to be published. Therefore, my description of books on Ghalib in Urdu is more an act of sampling than an exhaustive listing.

To begin at the beginning, Muhammad Husain Azad's *Aab-e Hayaat* (Water of Life) was first published in 1880, eleven years after Ghalib's death. Azad's book remains in print and has been translated into English by Frances Pritchett and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (Oxford University Press, 2001). Altaf Husain Hali's *Yaadgaar-e Ghalib* (Memory of Ghalib) appeared in 1897 and is a veritable cornucopia of anecdotes about the great bard. An interesting screed by the poet Yagana Changezi titled *Ghalib Shikan* (Ghalib Conqueror) appeared in 1935, which critiqued Ghalib in the most vituperative language, but it seems to have been shrugged off by Ghalibians. A dramatic representation of the world of Ghalib was provided by Mirza Farhatullah Baig (1883–1947) in *Dilli ki Aakhri Shama* (The Last Lamp of Delhi). The original Urdu version of that

book is available on the Internet, and it was translated with flair by Akhtar Qambar in 1979 as *The Last Musha'irah of Dehli* (Orient BlackSwan).

Fast-forwarding to the latter half of the twentieth century, in independent India and Pakistan, work on Ghalib continued and perhaps even accelerated around 1969, the centenary of his death. The noted Urdu scholar and fiction writer Naiyar Masud (1936–2017) wrote *Taabeer-e Ghalib* (Ghalib Realized) in 1973 (Kitab Nagar, Lucknow). Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's research on Ghalib was compiled into a 2001 book titled *Ghalib Par Chaar TehreereN* (Four Writings on Ghalib, Ghalib Institute, New Delhi).

Ghalib's rivalry with Zauq has received a lot of attention in Urdu books; those interested in following it up could begin with Ameer Husain Noorani's 1967 analysis tiled *Urdu ke Adabi Marake* (Urdu's Literary Battles, Naseem Book Depot, Lucknow). An analysis of Ghalib's Farsi output, including the ecumenical verses therein, can be found in Varis Kirmani's 2001 volume *Ghalib ki Farsi Shairi* (Ghalib's Farsi Poetry, Ghalib Institute, New Delhi). Both books are available as e-books on the Rekhta website; I discuss the Rekhta site later in this bibliography.

Urdu scholarship on Ghalib continues in the twenty-first century. A remarkable book by Professor Anwar Moazzam titled *Ghalib ki Fikri WaabastgiyaN* (Ghalib's Intellectual Foundations) was published by New Delhi's Ghalib Institute in 2011 and managed to provide new intellectual analysis to a much-plumbed terrain. Gopi Chand Narang's 2013 work *Ghalib: Ma'ani Afreeni, Jadliyaati Wazah, Shunyata aur Sheriyaat* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi) attempts to offer a philosophical analysis of his corpus of work, and in 2017 was translated by Surinder Deol as *Ghalib: Innovative Meanings and the Ingenious Mind* (Oxford University Press).

Ghalib in English

Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam's *Ghalib: 1797–1869: Life and Letters* arrived in 1969, the centenary year of Ghalib's death. In the same

year, *Mahfil*, a journal of South Asian literature, brought out a special issue on Ghalib with contributions from several stalwarts of the Urdu–English bridge, such as C.M. Naim, Aijaz Ahmad, Gopi Chand Narang, M.U. Memon and others. Work on Ghalib in English had begun in the subcontinent well before that, but now it took on an international dimension.

Dissertations on Ghalib began to appear in departments of comparative literature, history and other disciplines in the early twentieth century and work by scholars also continued apace. In the latter part of the century, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's book *The Secret Mirror: Essays on Urdu Poetry* (Academic Literature, New Delhi, 1981) contained detailed analyses of Ghalib's poems, and Frances Pritchett's 1994 book *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (University of California Press, Berkeley) presented itself as a spirited defence of the ghazal as a poetic form, including serious discussion on the work of Ghalib. Scholarly papers on Ghalib continue to pile up. Each one of the stalwarts mentioned above has written scores of pieces on Ghalib in English. Biographies of Ghalib include Natalia Prigarina's *Mirza Ghalib: A Creative Biography* (Oxford, 2000), which was originally published in Russian in 1986 and translated by Osama Faruqi; and Pavan Varma's *Ghalib: The Man, The Times* (Penguin, 2000), which included several important insights into Ghalib's Delhi, as well as his personality. I especially enjoyed Varma's depiction of the long court battle that characterized Ghalib's early life. A recent self-published book by Anwar Moazzam titled *Nightingale of an Uncreated Garden: Ghalib's Intellectual Concerns* is available in electronic bookstores like Amazon, and constitutes a stunningly erudite discussion on Ghalib's life, poetry and philosophy.

Papers on Ghalib are too numerous to list, but I would especially like to acknowledge C.M. Naim's 'Ghalib's Delhi: A Shamelessly Revisionist Look at Two Popular Metaphors', published in 2003 in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* and elsewhere.

Ghalib on the Internet

The Internet provides countless discussions of Ghalib's verses, many of them quirky, but many very informative. To give a quick example, http://www.urdupoetry.com/ghalib.html catalogues several of his ghazals, while http://www.nitasweb.com/andaaz-e-bayaaan-aur records occasional Ghalib verses. In this section, I wish to highlight three websites that provide a comprehensive roadmap to his poetry. I begin with the magisterial work of Professor Frances Pritchett. If you are interested in Ghalib, or in South Asian literature in general, just type http://www.columbia.edu/~fp7 into a search engine, and a world opens up, a vast cornucopia of Ghalibiat and several other offerings. Pritchett's work on Ghalib is titled *A Desertful of Roses* and contains, among other things, every sher in Ghalib's divaan translated, cross-referenced, contextualized and explained. There are bibliographies galore, papers and books that have been scanned and uploaded, references to other people's work on Ghalib, a truly extraordinary work. It is a name-dropping pleasure to state that I know Professor Pritchett personally.

The second debt is to the good folks at www.rekhta.org. Sanjiv Saraf and his team at Rekhta have been doing extraordinary work. I have relied on the Rekhta site to find the rarest of books on Ghalib in Urdu, each one meticulously scanned, easy to read and well organized. Friends who are less familiar with Urdu find the translations on the site great as well. I have never met Saraf but am a huge fan.

The third and emerging website on Urdu poetry is www.urdushahkar.org. S.M. Shahed maintains this site, and I am proud to call him my uncle. Urdu Shahkar has a wonderful format, with the poets' work presented in Nastaliq and Devanagri, a heavily annotated English translation and, a feature I find delightful, each poem declaimed clearly as a voicefile by Shahed. I am indebted to Shahed for (among many other things) explaining a particular snippet that I have used in Chapter 2 of Part I. Visit the site for Ghalib but stay for many others!

APPENDIX 3

A Ghalibian Timeline

1757 Major General Robert Clive of the East India Company defeats Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey, inaugurating the colonial era in India.

1765 Asadullah Khan's father, Mirza Abdullah Baig, is born in Delhi, of Uzbek ancestry.

1774 The East India Company creates the post of the governor-general of India.

1797 Asadullah Khan is born in Agra.

1801 Mirza Abdullah Baig dies, causing family fortunes to dip.

1808 Asadullah Khan composes his first ghazal. Takes on the takhallus (pen name) 'Asad'.

1810 Asadullah Khan (thirteen) marries Umrao Begum (eleven), a marriage that will last fifty-nine years, till his death. They have seven children, but none survive infancy. Mir Taqi Mir dies.

1813 Asadullah Khan moves to Delhi. After staying with his in-laws awhile, the couple move to a house in the Ballimaran neighbourhood.

1816 Asadullah Khan adopts the takhallus 'Ghalib'. He continues to use 'Asad', albeit infrequently.

1826 Ghalib begins a trip to Calcutta. He is away from Delhi for three years.

1833 Ghalib puts together his Urdu divaan. It remains unpublished.

1837 Bahadur Shah Zafar is crowned Mughal emperor. Ghalib is sued by a British wine merchant for defaulting on his debts. Delhi's first newspaper, *Delhi Urdu Akhbaar*, is published.

1841 Ghalib's divaan is published by Syed-ul Akhbar Press in Delhi.

1842 The First Indo-Afghan War ends in a humiliating defeat for the British.

1847 Ghalib is arrested and briefly jailed for gambling.

1848 Lord Dalhousie, the governor-general, promulgates the Doctrine of Lapse, seizing all kingdoms where the ruler dies without a male heir.

1856 The British dethrone Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh and annex the kingdom. The army introduces the Enfield 1853 rifle, causing suspicion in the enlisted ranks.

1857 The ghadar starts and rolls across north India. Rebels take over Delhi and put Bahadur

Shah Zafar in charge. The British reconquer Delhi and commit horrific atrocities on its citizenry. Ghalib's mentally challenged brother Yousuf dies.

1858 Bahadur Shah Zafar is exiled to Burma. Ghalib writes *Dastambu*, an account of the rebellion. Munshi Nawal Kishore starts his eponymous press in Lucknow.

1862 Bahadur Shah Zafar dies in exile in Rangoon.

1868 Ghalib's Urdu letters are published in a book titled *Ud-e Hindi* (Indian Perfume).

1869 Ghalib dies. Mahatma Gandhi is born.

1870 Umrao Begum dies.

1897 Altaf Husain Hali publishes *Yaadgaar-e Ghalib* (In the Memory of Ghalib), the first definitive biography of the bard.

1952 The Indian government issues a 'Mirza Ghalib' stamp.

1954 Sohrab Modi directs *Mirza Ghalib*, the first of several films on Ghalib, based on a script by Sa'adat Hasan Manto. Ghalib's grave is turned into a memorial.

1969 Ghalib Academy is set up in India on the centenary of his death. The Pakistan government issues a stamp to mark the occasion and sets up the Idaara-e-Yaadgaar-e-Ghalib (Institution in Memory of Ghalib).

A Note on Transliteration and Translation

There are several grounds on which my book can and should be critiqued, of which I want to anticipate two.

First, the transliteration scheme that I have adopted to represent Urdu is admittedly highly arbitrary and capricious. Academics and purists dealing with Urdu have developed a variety of precise and consistent transliteration formats. However, sometimes their very precision renders them arcane and intimidating to the eye. To maintain the popular flavour of the book, I have deliberately chosen to go with an unscientific, 'vernacular' format. My schema (if I may call it one) is derived from the way in which Hindustani words have been portrayed in movie posters in India over the years. For instance, a standard transliteration scheme deployed by the *Annual of Urdu Studies*, a respected journal, would represent a line from one of Ghalib's poems as *lāzim t^{h}ā ke dēk^{h}ō mirā rasta kō'ī din aur*. In this book, such a line would be *laazim tha ke dekho mera rasta koi din aur.* Likewise, Rekhta, the popular website on Urdu, represents the first line of Ghalib's divaan as *naqsh fariyādī hai kis kī shoḳhi-e-tahrīr kā*. I have instead gone with *naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tehreer ka.* Readers from the subcontinent who are in the habit of reading transliterated movie posters and advertisements will be familiar with this format. I beg the indulgence of others, on the plea that those who are finicky about transliteration are usually familiar with the original script and can therefore make do with the originals. However, I have consistently followed one rule: the nasal 'n' has been transliterated as 'N' (as in *haiN aur bhi duniya meiN sukhanwar bahut achche*).

Second, my translations can be critiqued on several grounds. I have chosen to translate several—though not all—poems and verses

rhythmically. Others have been rendered as free verse. Some of the ghazals have been rendered as rhyming couplets. That of course goes against the rhyme scheme of the genre, where two lines do not share rhythmic continuity except occasionally. Some might argue that it lessens the ghazal, transforming it into a different genre, akin to a masnavi or Chaucerian ‘heroic couplets’, genres that fell out of favour in Urdu and English poetry over a century ago. A keen-eyed reader may quibble about this liberty taken with the formal structure of the ghazal. For such a reader, the free verse translations might be better. Also, when I have tried my hand at rhyme, I have done my best not to inject myself, the translator, into the relationship between the poet and the reader.

Whether to translate rhythmically or as free verse is a difficult choice. Should one translate poetry as rhyme to reflect its potential ‘singability’ or ‘recitabilty’ and risk it degenerating occasionally into doggerel? Or should one strive to preserve the verbal integrity of the poem and eschew rhyme and metre in the hope that readers will understand the underlying poetics by themselves? In this book, there are poems and verses that cater to those who fall on both sides of this debate. The risk of course is that neither will be fully satisfied. The reader will have to be the final arbiter of whether my choices worked out. To wit, the translation plan is to disappoint everyone partially, rather than cater to one group and jettison the other.

Notes

PART I

Chapter 1: The Paragon of Urdu Expression

1. A divaan is an anthology, but usually contains only ghazals. The ghazals are ordered according to the last letter of the poem and must contain at least one ghazal ending with each letter of the Urdu alphabet. So the smallest possible divaan will have around twenty-five poems (Ghalib's divaan has 234). It is not a collection of a poet's entire works. Poets may publish several divaans in their lives, many of which may have overlapping poems.
2. Ghalib's love for mangoes is legendary. Ali Mir has written briefly on that; see 'The fruit that sent Mirza Ghalib into raptures', 18 May 2015, https://scroll.in/article/671801/the-fruit-that-sent-mirza-ghalib-into-raptures.

Chapter 2: The Half-Believer Sufi

1. For more on Sarmad, see N. Prigarina, 'Sarmad: Life and Death of a Sufi', *Ishraq*. *Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 3 (2012): 314–30, https://iphras.ru/uplfile/smirnov/ishraq/3/24_prig.pdf.
2. Asadullah, 'the Lion of God', is one of Ali's names.

Chapter 4: Ghalib and His Critics

1. Interestingly, there are very few critiques of Mir Taqi Mir, a poet who was as famously arrogant as Ghalib and was known to have referred to his contemporaries as 'insects'. Indeed, Ghalib and Zauq often argued about who loved Mir more. There was something about Mir that was beyond critique that even Ghalib did not possess.
2. Referring to Mirza Sauda, an earlier poet.

3. A maqta is the signed couplet that usually occurs at the end of a ghazal. The signature is referred to as the takhallus. Ghalib had two takhallus, ‘Ghalib’ and ‘Asad’.
4. Referring to Zauq.

Chapter 5: 1750–1850: The Urdu Century

1. For example, *Mir ke sher ka ahvaal kahooN kya Ghalib; jis ka divaan kam-az gulshan-e Kashmir nahiN* (What can I say about Mir’s poetry, Ghalib; his divaan is no lesser than a garden of Kashmir). Or, *Ghalib apna ye aqeeda hai ba-qaul-e Nasikh; aap be-bahra hai jo mo’taqad-e Mir nahiN* (Ghalib, as a dictum I quote Nasikh, that he who does not bow to Mir is wretched).

PART II

Chapter 1: The Ghazal Introduced

1. Ash’aar is the plural for sher (couplet).

Chapter 2: Anatomy of a Ghazal by Ghalib

1. It is worth noting that the shamsheer, a killing sword, plays a role in many of Ghalib’s poems, often as a sight that the subject welcomes. In another ghazal, he speaks of how the sight of the naked sword is a feast for the eyes.

Chapter 3: Ash’aar

1. I have used the male and female pronouns randomly in different ash’aar to highlight that there is no default gender in many ghazals. Indeed, more often than not, the object of the poet’s affection is male.
2. Jamshed’s bowl is one of the more famous vessels in history, akin to the Holy Grail. It is a cup of divination that is reputed to have contained the nectar of immortality.

Chapter 5: Matley

1. Is Ghalib saying that what we call the sky is but an ant's egg (to a higher power, or in a bigger context)? Or is he saying that human imagination is so vast that for it, the sky is smaller than an ant's egg? Both interpretations are plausible.

Chapter 6: Ghazaliyaat

1. This is a good example of the risaai ghazal, an elegy. Ghalib wrote this heartfelt piece on the death of his adoptive son, Zainul Abidin Arif, who died in 1852 at the age of thirty-five. Ghalib and Umrao Begum had lost seven children in infancy, and had showered their affections on Arif, who was Umrao Begum's nephew. The raw grief of this poem presents a challenge to translation like no other.
2. The full moon occurs on the fourteenth day of the lunar month.
3. This refers to a folk reference that some raindrops, when they fall into the sea, are swallowed by oysters and become pearls. To reach the oyster, they have to negotiate marine perils, embodied here by crocodiles. It is a metaphor for the difficulties that lie in the journey towards fulfilment.
4. The new moon announces the festival, and here, Ghalib connects the curve of the executioner's scimitar to the curve of the moon, to describe a martyr's passion.
5. Ghalib is being ironical here.
6. Lovers eventually find their clothes torn or bloodstained.
7. 'Banatunnash' (literally, 'the daughters of the bier') refers to the constellation Ursa Major, usually associated in Urdu poetry with beautiful women.
8. The poet's feelings provided the material for the nightingale's songs, so he thinks of himself as a teacher here.
9. This verse has many sorts of wordplay on the theme of unfurling. *Bharam khulna* is the 'unfurling of secrets', and the word *turrah*, which means a lock of hair, is also a metaphor for vanity and pride, which may be unfurled into humility.
10. Why would you want to be the scribe to letters written to your lover? Curiosity, jealousy, or a Cyrano de Bergerac–style attempt to communicate your own feelings through other suitors? You be the

judge. In this day and age, Ghalib may have written verses about peeking into his lover's Snapchat account or Instagram feed!

11. Jamshed, the famous king mentioned in Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, was associated with the magical bowl discussed in an earlier footnote. Ghalib is imputing an otherworldly purpose (and prowess) to his drinking.
12. Referring to one's love as infidel is an old practice in the ghazal tradition; it indicates that, at its peak, love begins to resemble worship, and so produces religiously undesirable effects.
13. Over the course of time, Ghalib's poetry has occasionally been infiltrated, sometimes by people who deleted a few verses, and at others by those who inserted a few 'rogue verses' in it. Purists swear that this is one such rogue verse that Ghalib never wrote. I include it to highlight this delightful phenomenon of plagiarism-in-reverse.
14. Ghalib at his best. Without the parenthetic comments, the words sound cryptic. But once illuminated, the sher shows myriad possibilities. For example, what does it mean to say that a desert is hidden by dust? Ghalib uses the metaphor of 'being left in the dust' to indicate an upstaging. The desolation of the poet shames the dryness of the desert, just as his tears upstage the oceans in their volume.
15. This is the recrimination of the dumped lover, who accuses the beloved (who is presumably either pale or red-faced).
16. The poet, at death's door, seeks to remain close to his killer libations. You may choose to read this as a denunciation of addictive habit, or a celebration of faithfulness.
17. This is a very poignant verse. Imagine a lover who finds that the object of their affections, distraught about something else, had sought solace in drink, but with someone else. 'How much better would it have been,' says the poet, 'had this been done in my company!'
18. Ghalib is perhaps extolling the human condition. Our house (station) is high enough that we need not wish for anything higher to view the heavens.
19. Ghalib is equating unrequited love with self-hatred. 'If you are in love with my rival, I am moving on. I am not hanging around in self-abasement,' the verse seems to say.
20. This verse reflects a Sufi temperament. One apprehends everything, including the divine, through self-awareness. But at the same time, one

needs to be reckless about the ‘self’ to be close to the mystical.

21. ‘Turning the heart to blood’ is the true labour of love.

Appendix 1

1. A prophet known to have had a long life.

Appendix 2

1. I will confine myself here to Ghalib’s translations into English published as books. I offer advance apologies for many great translations of Ghalib I have not listed, in books, magazines and journals.

THE BEGINNING

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